



BACCANO!

1711 Whitesmile

RYOHGO NARITA

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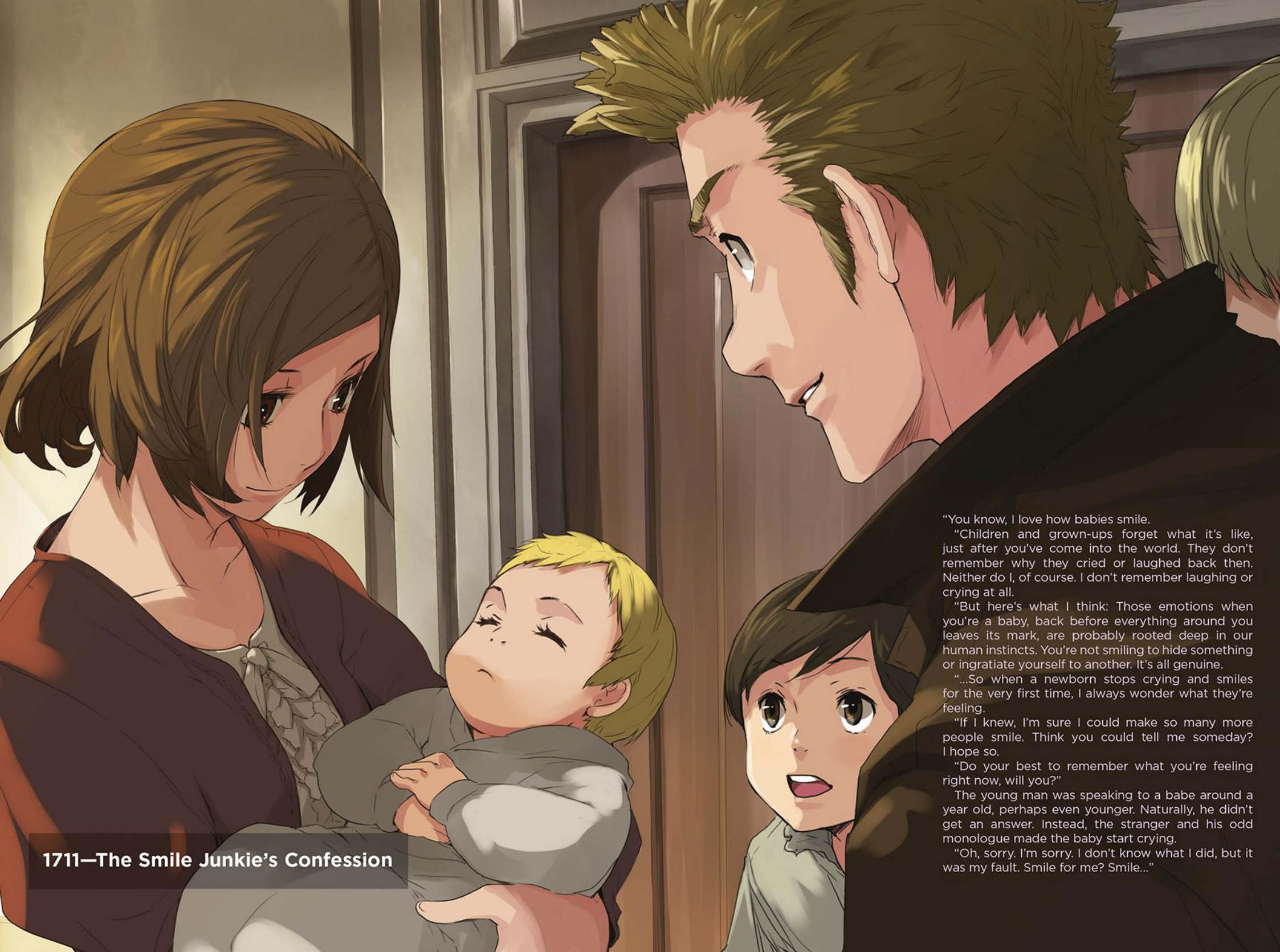


BACCANO!

1711 Whitesmile

**RYOHGO
NARITA**

ILLUSTRATION BY
KATSUMI ENAMI



1711—The Smile Junkie's Confession

"You know, I love how babies smile.

"Children and grown-ups forget what it's like, just after you've come into the world. They don't remember why they cried or laughed back then. Neither do I, of course. I don't remember laughing or crying at all.

"But here's what I think: Those emotions when you're a baby, back before everything around you leaves its mark, are probably rooted deep in our human instincts. You're not smiling to hide something or ingratiate yourself to another. It's all genuine.


"...So when a newborn stops crying and smiles for the very first time, I always wonder what they're feeling.

"If I knew, I'm sure I could make so many more people smile. Think you could tell me someday? I hope so.

"Do your best to remember what you're feeling right now, will you?"

The young man was speaking to a babe around a year old, perhaps even younger. Naturally, he didn't get an answer. Instead, the stranger and his odd monologue made the baby start crying.

"Oh, sorry. I'm sorry. I don't know what I did, but it was my fault. Smile for me? Smile..."



Victor: "So? How's the grub down here?
Not bad, huh?"

Nile: "Let me just say this: Give me liquor."

Victor: "You're going into questioning after
this. What kinda dumbass would get
you drunk first?"

Nile: "It may loosen my tongue."

Victor: "If your tongue gets any looser, you'll
start using swears they haven't invented
yet."

Nile: "Let me just say this: You are absolutely
correct."

Victor: "...All right, wise guy. You wanna settle
the score from two hundred and ninety-
one years ago right here and now?"

Denkurou: "Let that be enough, gentlemen. You'll
disturb those around us."

Victor: "Man, it's been forever since I ate with
you guys like this. Although it's just not
the same without Zank around."

Denkurou: "I do not believe we ate with you more
than once or twice, aside from the
voyage..."

Victor: "C'mon, just 'cause we didn't eat
together all the time don't mean it didn't
matter. It's been almost three centuries,
but we can still have a meal like old times.
Not everyone can say that, y'know?
Just wish we had more ladies around.
Sylvie's in another room, talking to one
of my men."

Nile: "You always did prate about them
constantly when you were drunk."

Victor: "Heh, sorry. After all, the ladies wouldn't
leave me alone. I just had so many
stories."

Denkurou: "If I had to say, I believe it was you who
were the plaything of one wild young
woman..."

Victor: "Shaddup! I let her play with me because
I liked it! She just *thought* she had the
upper hand; she was wrapped around
my finger the whole time!"

Nile: "Let me say this: ...There are tears in
your eyes."

Even now, I dream about it sometimes—about Lotto Valentino.

It's been nearly three hundred years, and I still can't forget. After all this time, you'd think I'd have far more memories than the human brain can hold, and yet... I suppose that part of me may no longer be human anyway.

Maybe that's why the last days I spent as a human are engraved so deeply on my mind.

When I remember Gretto now, I don't think there was anything uniquely charming about him. He didn't have any special powers. He wasn't terribly manly, or twice as kind as the average person, or anything like that. I was a maid at the time, so I didn't think about such things. Even if I had, I doubt I could have put it into words. He wasn't so much a reliable man as one I wanted to protect.

It may sound arrogant, but for better or for worse, I felt as if I had to stay with him. He was rather like a child—again, for better or for worse.

Of course, that very childlike quality was why he talked with a servant like me as if we were equals...and maybe that's why he was kind enough to fall in love with me.

And so I wanted to repay him somehow.

Was I the caged songbird, or was he? I don't know anymore... Whatever the answer, the cage burned away in the flames consuming the town. Ultimately, it didn't matter which of us had been the real captive.

My memories of leaving town are also my last memories with Gretto, so every time I dream about it, I'm not sure what to do.

Even now, three hundred years later...I don't know whether to smile or cry.



PROLOGUE

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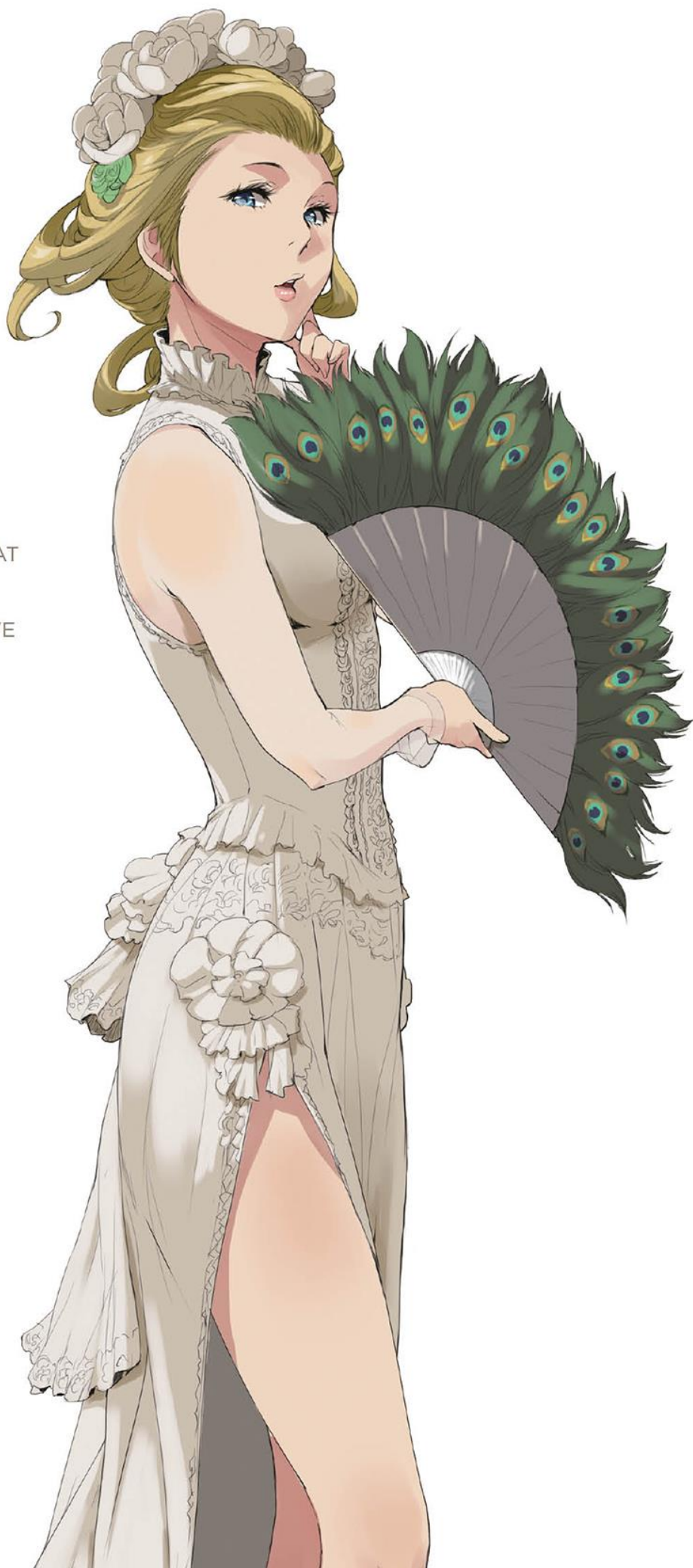
VICTOR TALBOT'S REPORT
(EXCERPT)

INTERLUDE

VICTOR TALBOT'S REPORT
(EXCERPT) II

INTERLUDE

VICTOR TALBOT'S REPORT
(EXCERPT) III



BACCANO!

1711 Whitesmile

VOLUME 17

RYOHGO NARITA
ILLUSTRATION BY **KATSUMI ENAMI**



NEW YORK

Copyright

BACCANO!, Volume 17: 1711 WHITESMILE

RYOHGO NARITA

Translation by Taylor Engel

Cover art by Katsumi Enami

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BACCANO! Vol.17

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Edited by Dengeki Bunko

First published in Japan in 2011 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

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First Yen On Edition: August 2021

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Narita, Ryōgo, 1980– author. | Engel, Taylor, translator.

Title: Baccano! / Ryohgo Narita ; translation by Taylor Engel.

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen On, 2016–

Identifiers: LCCN 2015045300 | ISBN 9780316270366 (v. 1 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316270397 (v. 2 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316270410 (v. 3 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316270434 (v. 4 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316558662 (v. 5 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316442275 (v. 6 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316442312 (v. 7 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316442329 (v. 8 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316442343 (v. 9 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316442367 (v. 10 : hardback) | ISBN 9781975356859 (v. 11 : hardback) | ISBN 9781975384715 (v. 12 : hardback) | ISBN 9781975384739 (v. 13 : hardback) | ISBN 9781975384753 (v. 14 : hardback) | ISBN

9781975384777 (v. 15 : hardback) | ISBN 9781975321567 (v. 16 : hardback) | ISBN 9781975321901 (v. 17 : hardback)

Subjects: CYAC: Science fiction. | Nineteen twenties—Fiction. | Organized crime—Fiction. | Prohibition—Fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Science Fiction / Adventure.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.N37 Bac 2016 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015045300>

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-2190-1 (hardcover)

978-1-9753-2191-8 (ebook)

E3-20210720-JV-NF-ORI

And so they put out to sea, bound for a new world, which they knew only from stories—

—and unfurled the sail of alchemy to catch the winds rising in their hearts.

For Maiza Avaro, his wind was the pursuit of knowledge.

For Szilard Quates, ambition.

For Victor Talbot, duty.

For Begg Garrott, a spirit of inquiry.

For Denkurou Tougou and Zank Rowan, chivalry.

For Gretto Avaro and Sylvie Lumiere, escape.

For Nile, obligation.

For Czeslaw Meyer, the will of another.

Many other alchemists departed on a voyage across the vast ocean, swept along by their own winds.

Among them were two men who showed their winds to no one.

For Lebreau Fermet Viralesque, it was a wind of malice, so perfectly clear and transparent that no one else could see it.

And for Huey Laforet—



PROLOGUE

AFTERGLOW OF THE DREAM

PROLOGUE: AFTERGLOW OF THE DREAM

2003 A maritime history museum Somewhere on the American East Coast

“And so this ship, the *Advena Avis*, finally arrived! Carrying scientists who had escaped persecution in Europe, the vessel introduced new seeds of wisdom and knowledge to the American continent. This ship was a critical part of history as we know it!”

As their guide’s voice rose with excitement, the visitors studied the old ship on display in the museum with a variety of reactions.

“Its duty completed, the ship was put to rest on the shore—and, in accordance with the wishes of its passengers, it has been preserved as you see it. In order to keep it as close as possible to its original state, damage from shipworms and rot has been left unrepaired, so it isn’t currently seaworthy. However, its value as a resource is immeasurable. If history is an ocean, then this ship’s place on our nautical chart is—”

With the guide’s incessant explanation in his ears, one young man was looking up at the ship, wearing a complicated expression.

Finally, the commentary ended, and the visitors were asked if they had any questions. The young man raised his hand.

“Um... Excuse me. The ones who were on this boat, the alche—er, scientists. Did they leave any documents on their research behind?”

“Oh yes, those are kept in the archives center.”

“Is it possible to go see them?”

“...Erm, my apologies. Many of those materials are currently undergoing analysis, and if I recall, they aren’t available for viewing. But I can introduce you to the manager of the archives center in a

few minutes. Please fill out an application, and then ask him about it directly.”

This seemed to satisfy the young man. Without another word, he returned his attention to the *Advena Avis*, the museum’s largest exhibit.

The youth was a traveler. He hadn’t done anything particularly important with his life, and he wasn’t planning to.

However, he’d left Italy, the land of his birth, and followed a certain story all the way to this distant place.

What had led him was an act committed long ago by his own ancestor...

...and a peculiar fate that still lingered in the present, several hundred years later.



“I’m very sorry about the delay. These materials are usually restricted, so getting them released took some doing.” With that, the head of the archives center brought out a heap of old parchment.

At first, the request to study them had nearly been turned down flat—*They’re currently being examined, so we can’t show them to you*—but when the manager noticed the name on his viewing application, he’d changed his tune. *Excuse me, but might you be a relation of Jean-Pierre Accardo?* he’d asked.

The young man was all too familiar with that name. It belonged to his ancestor, an Italian poet and the reason he’d resolved to take this long journey, even though it had meant going into debt.

The poet and playwright had been born several centuries earlier, and he had departed this world long ago.

However, he'd left behind a large quantity of parchment that detailed the "confession of a sinner and criminal," and that account had very slightly changed the destiny of his descendant.

When the young man had answered in the affirmative, the manager had promptly contacted the head of the archives, and now here they were.

"To tell you the truth, we've sent some of our staff to Lotto Valentino before, but they weren't able to find anything significant about the ship," said the head of the archives as he began to spread out the materials he'd brought in. "There's a reason these documents are kept private, you see. Publicizing them could seriously damage the reputations of Lotto Valentino's current residents. Some of the facts in here are just that extreme."

He produced nautical charts, a sextant, a compass, other navigation tools—and a book.

It seemed to be a journal of sorts; when he opened it, its pages were covered with dense writing.

After flipping to a certain page, the head of the archives glanced at the young man.

"This book appears to have been written by a passenger, starting before they boarded and continuing through the voyage. Some parts of it are very odd, and we don't understand what its intended purpose was. At first, we thought it was simply a travelogue, but the standard paper of the time was crude stuff made from rags, while the paper in this book is of very good quality. If you only look at the beginning, it almost seems to be a report to some unknown person."

Breaking off for a moment, the man drew a deep breath, then went on slowly.

"...But then it starts talking about 'immortals' and a 'demon'... The museum guide calls them scientists, but more accurately, they seem

to have been alchemists. They say some alchemists did attempt to summon demons in the past, so the mentions themselves aren't especially surprising, but—"

"Does it mention that they managed to make an elixir of immortality?" the young man interrupted. "Or that they actually became immortal?"

His remark seemed to startle the head of the archives. "So you do know something, then?! Did your ancestor leave something about it?!" he asked with excitement.

Before answering, the young man asked him a question of his own.

"...What makes you think he did?"

"I beg your pardon. I meant to explain it first thing... Look here."

When the young man's eyes found the spot the man was pointing at, near the center of the text, he gasped quietly.

Jean-Pierre Accardo.

His ancestor's name was right there on the page.

He didn't know what the surrounding context was, but the fact that the name was in the book at all meant his ancestor had some sort of connection to these documents.

"Accardo himself apparently wasn't on board the *Advena Avis*, but it does seem as if a few of his acquaintances were. How exactly they were acquainted I couldn't tell you, but...several of them mentioned him in the journals they left behind."

"Huh? Several?"

Why would they just leave their journals on the ship?

Perhaps picking up on the young man's unspoken question, the head of the archives cleared his throat, then went on gravely. "Yes, their

voyage from Italy to America was far from smooth. One of the passengers killed several of the others aboard the ship.”

“He killed...his companions?”

“That’s right. The information we have only deepens the mystery. When I heard we might have lucked into some information from a descendant of someone who knew them, I could hardly contain myself. At least until a moment ago.” As he apologized, the director closed the journal, then returned to the subject of the *Advena Avis*. “After all, this ship was rather unique. It didn’t have a regular crew; the alchemists seem to have crossed the Atlantic all on their own.”

“No crew? Is that even possible?!” the young man asked with surprise.

The director nodded calmly. “Although they were alchemists, some of them seem to have had experience in navigation. The ship was full of quite unique individuals. It originally belonged to the House of Boroñal, which governed Lotto Valentino, but it was apparently donated to a certain school for alchemists in the town.”

“Why did the alchemists leave without hiring sailors?”

“One theory says it was to prevent their research from being exposed to outsiders...but I expect the truth of the matter is that they didn’t have time.”

“Huh?”

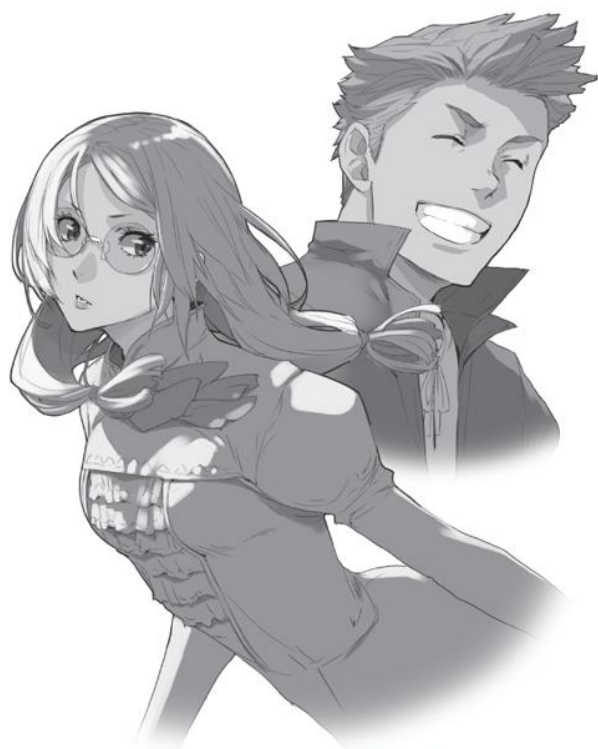
“According to the journal, they seemed to be fleeing the port,” the head of the archives said matter-of-factly.

The young man gulped. “Fleeing? From what?”

“Oh, well, it’s a long story, and we don’t know everything about the circumstances, either, but...”

The director’s response was as impassive as ever—which was why it sent a particularly eerie chill down the young man’s spine.

“From the town itself, you see. From Lotto Valentino.”



CHAPTER 1

THE LAUGHTER OF THE INFLUENTIAL

CHAPTER 1: THE LAUGHTER OF THE INFLUENTIAL

Once, in a certain town in Italy, there was a girl named Niki.

Everyone knew her simply as Niki; she had no family name. She might have had one once, but she didn't know it, and she had no way of learning what it was anymore.

She had been sold by a slave merchant to a certain town—and the townspeople had very nearly burned through her life and discarded her.

She'd never known hope of any kind. Her life had been full of darkness so deep that she couldn't see the road ahead. She saw only death.

But then she'd been saved from that darkness, and more than once.

The first time was when a murderer known as the Mask Maker had shown her hope in the midst of death.

The second was when a womanizing lord had shown her human kindness.

The third was when young alchemists had shown her a way of living that certainly couldn't be called "just."

That second time had marked the beginning of a miraculous few days.

She used to believe the rest of her life would be nothing more than a cycle of pain, and she'd hoped death at the Mask Maker's hands would finally set her free. But her values had been overturned with incredible ease—well, perhaps *ease* was not the right word, but in terms of the time it had taken relative to how dramatic the change had been, it was fair to say her world had turned upside down all at once.

Had that change made her life brighter, in the end?

Or had it propelled her toward a greater hell?

Even she didn't know the answer yet.

At present, the girl was working as a servant for a certain group of alchemists. Her life here was far richer than it had been when she was a slave—but a fulfilling life hadn't been what she wanted.

She'd been looking for her own place to die.

Before the town's reform, scores of other slave children had died...while she herself had been fortunate enough to survive.

How should she approach the remaining days she'd been given? While the girl was feeling uncertain about this, a certain boy had spoken to her.

Keep living in order to find your place to die, and once you find it, you should die smiling, he'd said. If you do, it'll make me happy.

What a terribly self-centered thing to say.

However, that very self-centeredness was what had convinced Niki, and she understood that he really meant it.

That boy had been one of the people who'd saved her, and as he'd said, she'd kept on living her modest life for the sole purpose of finding a death she could be satisfied with.

Time went by—and then a notice reached her.

One of the young alchemists who had dragged her out of the darkness and given her a reason to live—had died. And yet even when she was informed of this loss, she *didn't* despair.

The death of a benefactor—someone whose life, she'd thought, had far more value than her own—made Niki even less certain of her place to die.

Furthermore, that confusion was her only strong reaction to the news. While she did think it was sad, she wasn't able to cry and wail, and she was quietly ashamed of herself for it.

Even though nobody reproached her, she held on to that hatred of her own heart.

And so time flowed quietly on, leaving the girl who couldn't find her place to die far in the distant past...



1711 Lotto Valentino, the Italian Peninsula

"Not too much farther, eh, you old codger?"

Dark clouds hung over the plain, ready to spit rain at any moment. A highway ran through grass that streamed in the sea wind, and two horses were slowly plodding along it.

"Well now, time to find out what terrors lie in store for us." The man on the right, who seemed to be pushing thirty, grinned at his scowling, elderly companion next to him.

The older man didn't react, and his voice was flat as he responded.

"Nothing that will cause any trouble. *An understanding has already been reached*, as you might recall."

"I dunno. After all, I hear this place has quite a few...quirks." The young man went on, smiling with genuine enjoyment. "For one, Lotto Valentino is technically under the jurisdiction of the viceroy of Naples, but it's mostly isolated from all the surrounding countries. The church has almost no influence there, and the war has hardly touched it. Meanwhile, it's a stone's throw from Naples, it's got room for plenty of big ships to anchor, and it's perfect for a trading hub. What a strange town."

“I’m already aware of that; you don’t need to tell me. Or are you saying you can’t trust your own memory, and you wish for me to confirm your recollection?”

“Come on, don’t be so sour. I’m so excited about the job that I want to review everything we’re about to do. I’m like a boy waiting to go on holiday.” Lowering his voice slightly, the young man went on, chuckling. “An uncanny town, and then inside it, you’ll find murderers and drugs and counterfeit gold besides. Doesn’t get more thrilling than that, eh, Szilard?”

Szilard just shook his head, still frowning.

“I told you before we left. We’re simply doing our job. Curb your curiosity, Victor.”

“Oh, for God’s sake. You’ve got no dreams, Szilard.” The young man, Victor, tried to shrug in response, but he wasn’t able to make the gesture obvious enough on horseback.

“Only a novice alchemist would allow himself to be manipulated by something as nebulous as dreams. And for an envoy of the House of Dormентаire, you’re mediocre at best.”

At the mention of the name “Dormентаire,” Victor clicked his tongue in irritation, softly enough that the older man wouldn’t hear it.

The two were alchemists whose research was funded by support from the House of Dormентаire, an influential Spanish noble family.

Victor apparently had a few thoughts regarding that position, but he didn’t verbalize any of them. He just rode on, wearing the same smile as before. “Of course a novice like me looks mediocre to someone like you, Szilard. But we’ve never visited this town before. If you go in with too much confidence, you might regret it in the end. You won’t catch me dropping my guard. I don’t care who these Mask Makers are or what mysteries lie in the shadows of this place. I want to see it all with my own eyes, lay it open, and strip it bare.”

Despite the ominous nature of the town they were approaching, Victor's voice was filled with hope.

Szilard gave a thin, scornful smile. "Have you considered that it may be you who has too little confidence in the House of Dormентаire?"

"What?"

"There it is."

When they crested a small hill, the port town sprang into view.

Lotto Valentino was a small city, with a population of fifty thousand. The stone structures on its hillsides had been built to overlook the ocean, and the townscape between the sea and the mountains formed a beautiful image with the land.

The Tyrrhenian Sea, part of the Mediterranean, was its usual vivid blue that day, and it colored every single view like a picture.

"...Huh?"

But there were several elements all over the town that completely spoiled that picture. Victor grimaced when he saw them.

In front of the buildings—particularly important-looking shops and studios, and even fine mansions that seemed to be aristocratic residences—hung signs and banners bearing the same crest.

The emblem's design was not ugly, but the golden hourglass was something Victor was very used to seeing. It was more than enough reason for him to feel disappointed about the situation in the town.

"I warned you, didn't I? You shouldn't get too curious," the old man murmured, gazing at the town that had been overrun by the Dormентаire crest. "No matter what it is, everything falls into the House of Dormентаire's hands."

Lotto Valentino was already under the family's control—but instead of stating the obvious to his young colleague, Szilard spoke with some irony.

“If you are harboring hope for such a thing, you are an incorrigible daydreamer indeed.”



Meanwhile The special reference room of the Third Library Lotto Valentino

“You’re certain you won’t regret this, Maiza?” asked an elderly man illuminated by a lantern flame. “The *Advena Avis* will arrive in port this month. We’ll have put ourselves firmly in the debt of the Mars Clan, but the House of Dormентаire won’t touch it. Not until it leaves port, at least.”

“Thank you very much. That’s enough.”

“On the other hand, after you’ve set sail...you won’t be able to return to this town for several years at the very least. Several decades if you’re unlucky. I trust you’re taking that into account when you say you have no regrets, Maiza. No doubt you’ll lose your noble status and your place at your father’s deathbed.”

Even though it was still daytime, the room was so dark that neither would have been able to make out the other’s face if it hadn’t been for the lantern’s glow. In its flickering light, the other man reflected on the grave admonition, then nodded firmly.

“Yes. I have no attachment to my rank. If something happens to my father, I’m sure my younger brother and cousin will handle it. I never had any intention of reconciling with my father.”

When he heard the bespectacled youth’s answer, the elderly man responded with some irony in his voice. “You certainly had a lot to say. It proves that you do still have feelings for your relations.”

“...I am human, after all. I can’t rid myself of emotions regarding my family so easily.”

Even as he acknowledged the old man’s barb, the young man wore a rather forlorn smile.

By the entrance to the room they were talking in, there was a sign that read SPECIAL REFERENCE ROOM.

Indeed, this room held a wide variety of articles—fossils and ancient stone tools, original manuscripts of a certain type of book and other rare volumes, the seeds of non-indigenous plants, and other things harder to easily identify—that lent it a peculiar atmosphere.

In its center, there were chairs for visitors, and at the back, there was a magnificent wooden desk. The dignified elderly man seated at that desk created a picture that seemed more appropriate to a director’s room rather than the special reference room.

It was true that the man in that chair was the person in charge of the library—but this room had no direct connection to the library’s duties. Some might say it was where the director showed his other face.

Dalton Strauss was an alchemist who carried himself like an all-knowing magician. The wooden prosthetic which served as his right hand creaked as he took another look at the young man’s face.

“Because you’re human, you say? If you get your wish, *do you suppose you’ll consider yourself human afterward?*”

“.....”

Dalton’s question was pregnant with meaning, and Maiza fell silent.

“You don’t appear to know the answer to that yet.” Smiling thinly, Dalton stood from his chair and continued, picking up a fossilized shell from the shelf. “It doesn’t matter, though. If I told you to feel what this shell is feeling, you wouldn’t be able to answer. If I asked

you what the shell thought, assuming it was still conscious after being fossilized, no doubt you wouldn't even be able to imagine it. This change may seem as drastic as a transformation from a human into this fossilized shell. I trust you're prepared for that, Maiza?"

Gazing into his apprentice's eyes, Dalton went on to make sure he understood.

"That...is what it means to become immortal."

Immortal.

The word seemed fanciful, and yet it was very familiar to anyone studying alchemy.

Among alchemists, there were many who considered immortality and the creation of life as their ultimate goals, or as points along the way to their ultimate goal.

In addition, Maiza knew:

Dalton was one of those who had sought immortality.

And he had actually obtained it.

"When I look at you, Maestro Dalton, I can't think you're as far removed from humanity as you say."

"I'm not so certain. I may be a monster who only carefully parses human speech to better imitate it."

"You jest."

"I certainly do not. Would an ordinary person attempt to teach another how to become immortal? After a century or so of life, anyone with a proper mind would understand that immortality is no great gift and would probably hide that method away. They would fear exposure to inquisitive eyes and try to hide the fact of their immortality." Dalton gave a small sigh, then resumed his seat, still

holding the fossil. “And yet I don’t sincerely try to hide the fact that I am immortal. Here I am teaching you how to become so yourself.”



“Why *did* you teach me?”

“Mere curiosity. My interest as a researcher, or perhaps as an immortal, simply outweighed my sense of ethics as a human being.”

As if to say he had nothing to hide, Dalton went on solemnly.

“There is a good possibility that becoming immortal will make you unhappy. I haven’t hidden that fact from you. Yet even then, I can’t tell you to give up on it—which only proves how my mind has come off its hinges. That is what I’m saying. I’ve even lost the desire to sell that knowledge to the aristocrats and make a fortune... As an individual alchemist, however, I would like someone with your talents to live a long time.”

“You overestimate me.”

“That’s not for you to decide.” After flatly rejecting Maiza’s attempt at humility, Dalton studied the fossil somberly. “I regret it constantly.”

“You do?”

“Yes. When you live a long life, you have that many more errors to drag along behind you... One recent regret is that I overlooked someone who should have received immortality sooner.” The man who had once slit his own throat and then regenerated in front of Maiza gazed into empty space, muttering with little emotion in his voice. “You know about Elmer and Huey and their friend Monica, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

Those three names seemed like an abrupt addition to the conversation. They belonged to young people who had studied alchemy under Dalton at this library.

Elmer was the only one Maiza spoke to often. He wasn’t very familiar with the other two, but he did remember their names clearly.

Dalton had called Huey Laforet a genius at every turn, and so the name had been impressed on his memory. Maiza wasn't a jealous person by nature, but that was also why he hadn't tried to learn more about Huey.

The other, Monica Campanella—

He'd heard that she'd died in an accident involving the House of Dormентаire one year ago.

Maiza knew it wasn't an accident or anything like it, but he hadn't pressed the issue. The continued effects of the incident did trouble him, however.

"Has it already been a year since then?"

"It has. I keep thinking...if I'd given immortality to Monica—to all three of them—perhaps Huey Laforet's ability would not have been extinguished."

He'd phrased himself in a roundabout way, but Maiza understood what he meant.

After all, he knew one more piece of information about them.

A short while after Monica's death...

...Huey Laforet had vanished from Lotto Valentino.

It had been quite a while since he'd gone missing, and a rumor to the effect that he might have chosen to follow Monica to the afterlife was circulating among the students who studied alchemy at the library. Maiza suspected the same.

"That day, the town unmistakably made an enemy of the House of Dormентаire. I'd suspected they were involved in that event somehow, but..."

"I won't be the one to tell you. The proper way would be to ask Elmer directly."

“Yes, I don’t intend to reopen old wounds. I imagine it’s painful for Elmer to talk about it.” Saying no more on the subject, Maiza shifted the conversation back to its original topic. “All that aside, I have no lingering attachment to the town itself.”

“Are you saying the place is done for?”

“No doubt it has a future, if only under Dormентаire control. When you think of it that way, the locals may become better people than they were when they forced slaves to make that drug, but...”

“‘It matters not what happens after I’m gone’?” Dalton murmured ironically again.

Maiza neither confirmed nor denied the remark. There was a complicated emotion in his smile. “...If I manage to become immortal during my travels, I’ll come back here again someday.”

“Oh?”

“Unlike our father, my brother, Gretto, is an honest man. He does tend to be a little cowardly, but I believe he’ll be able to create real change. If I can visit secretly and see what comes of it, that will satisfy me.”

After that remark, Maiza left the room.

For a little while, Dalton silently cleaned the fossil with a feather duster, but then—

Sighing deeply, he murmured to himself, “‘It’s painful for Elmer to talk about it,’ hmm?”

He wasn’t remarking on Maiza’s resolution for the future, but something that had come up during their conversation’s detour.

“Apparently, he doesn’t yet understand that eccentric completely.” Dalton picked up a sheet of parchment from the desk with his left hand and studied it.

It appeared to be a list of names, most of which belonged to alchemists who were moderately famous in Lotto Valentino.

“Now, then... How many more people will end up traveling on that ship...?”

Glancing at his prosthetic hand, Dalton reminisced about his past. Only those who had found immortality the way he had would understand what he said next.

“I hope one of them will be able to entertain that demon a little.”



Meanwhile In Lotto Valentino The Avaro residence

“Enough of this, Gretto! Are you trying to drag my name through the mud?!”

A man with a short, evenly trimmed beard was shouting at a youth with a boyish face.

The young man seemed troubled as he answered. “No, Father, that wasn’t my intent.”

The man and his son were in a certain aristocrat’s mansion, in the beautifully furnished office of the master of the house. The shelves were lined with imported, obviously expensive articles, and the ornate, even ostentatious decor seemed to be an especially forceful attempt to broadcast the power of the family patriarch.

The personality of the room fit the nobleman perfectly as he bore down on his son. This was not the virtuous rebuke of a parent, but something more like the anger of a boss berating a subordinate.

“It doesn’t matter what your intentions are!” the head of the House of Avaro said harshly to his youngest child, Gretto Avaro. “Either way, the result is a stain on my name! Now of all times... Those Dormентаire scoundrels are already on the verge of taking over the

town! Are you trying to hand them the House of Avaro's weakness?!"

Lotto Valentino was gradually falling under the control of the House of Dormентаire, a Spanish noble family.

Their power was worming its way into every corner of the city, and they were attempting to dominate both the legal and the illegal sides of its economy.

Lotto Valentino had never been a very religious place, so they hadn't used the power of the church to infiltrate it. Instead, the House of Dormентаire had let their money speak for them, and their reach extended from the town's small shops all the way to the purses of certain members of the aristocracy.

The cause of it all had been an attack by the Mask Makers, a local criminal group, on the House of Dormентаire's envoy.

Originally, "the Mask Maker" had been the name of a mysterious murderer, but by now, it had turned into the name of an entire criminal organization.

They had set fire to military posts and a Dormентаire ship that had been anchored in the port, they had stolen resources, and they had attacked a certain "criminal" who was being held on the ship.

Their target had apparently died, but the head of the House of Avaro didn't know any of the details. He assumed the Mask Makers had simply silenced one of their companions, and he didn't take any further interest in the matter.

What concerned him was that the House of Dormентаire, one of Europe's most distinguished families, might retaliate against Lotto Valentino itself for the Mask Makers' attack.

His worry had proved entirely accurate.

While they hadn't literally destroyed the town with their warships' cannons, they had dispatched many times more personnel on the pretext of conducting a search for the Mask Makers. By now, it was hard to tell whether there were more actual residents or Dormентаire men in town.

The changes that had occurred here in only a year made the nobles shudder. At the same time, they couldn't put up a resistance economically, so they spent their days in fear and anger.

Gretto's father was one such noble.

"Just turning down an offer of marriage or two won't drag your name through the mud, Father," the young man said, looking away. "The House of Dormентаire isn't going to care that I did, either."

"True. The problem is *why* you turned it down."

"Well... I wish I could apologize to her family, but I really didn't think I could make it work. What choice did I have? This isn't a strategic marriage to improve our social status, is it?" Gretto still couldn't look at his father, seeming rather uncomfortable.

His father snorted and flatly rejected his son's statement. "Didn't think you could make it work? Don't be ridiculous. You never had any interest in her family or her face or the content of her character, did you?"

"What are you talking about, Father?"

"Do you think I know nothing about my own son?"

"...?" Gretto was dubious.

Wearing a furious, derisive smile, his father tore into him. "Did you honestly believe I hadn't noticed, Gretto? How you let our housemaid's coquettish glances turn your head?"

"...!" Gretto blanched.

It was true—he hadn't rejected the offer of marriage his father had brought him because of the woman herself. He'd already been in love with someone else.

To be more specific, he was not only in love, but he was loved in return.

His beloved wasn't a noblewoman or a merchant, but one of the maids who worked at the mansion. There were some Lotto Valentino nobles who wouldn't have cared about her position, but the current head of the House of Avaro was adamant that his own son—even if it was his second son—must not be wedded to a maid.

Meanwhile, Gretto knew about his father's nature, so he had kept his affections a secret. He was stunned to realize it hadn't been a secret at all, but he had to deny one of his father's remarks.

"Don't say she seduced me, Father. I only fell in love with her, that's all. I'm the one who spoke to her first!"

He may not know which maid it is yet.

Still harboring that hope, he'd avoided bringing up his sweetheart's name, but...

"Nothing you can say will save Sylvie Lumiere." His father shattered Gretto's hopes easily. "You've been taken in by the honeyed words of a serving girl. You may try to cover it up, but *I have decided* that those are the facts. If you'd prefer, we can say that Sylvie 'prepared' you, and you lost your senses."

"Father...what...are you saying?"

This so-called preparation was most likely the drug an alchemist had manufactured under Lord Avaro's direction. This drug had been made in an attempt to get the town under his thumb, and Gretto had long ago lost all affection for the man. Unlike his older brother, Maiza, though, he hadn't had the courage to publicly rebel against

him. With no specific way to resolve his situation, Gretto had simply abandoned himself to his affection for a girl named Sylvie Lumiere.

He'd known from the very beginning.

The only member of his family who might bless their love was his brother, Maiza.

Unlike his father, his grandparents had been uninhibited as nobles went. If they'd been around, the story might have been different—but Gretto's grandparents had already passed on. His mother's parents were still alive, but they had practically no influence on his father. The bohemian behavior of the previous Avaro head had weakened the family, and it was the current head, Gretto's own father, who was trying to reclaim their former glory by going completely against the example of his predecessor. Knowing this, Gretto had developed very mixed feelings.

In the end, he'd waited.

Maybe Father's nature will change overnight.

Maybe something will change gradually while I'm keeping my love with Sylvie a secret.

Maybe my brother will talk him around.

Maybe Father will get sick and die. If only Mother is left, I may be able to persuade her.

If my brother takes over as the head of the family, I'll be able to leave it.

Maybe there'll be a revolution, and our aristocratic rank will lose all meaning.

Maybe this world will suddenly belong to me and Sylvie alone.

Even the things I think are impossible may be reality someday.

If I wait, something's bound to change. I mustn't act yet.

Not until something changes. Until it changes. Until it changes.

What if...nothing changes?

No, that's impossible.

Things have already changed.

The drug vanished from the streets.

The townspeople stopped trading slaves.

My brother lost some of his rough edges.

Yes, change is possible.

It's all right. If I wait...something will definitely change!

That thought had taken over Gretto's heart.

And so he had done nothing.

He'd taken refuge in the act of waiting.

Meanwhile, the first thing he'd gained by taking a chance had been Sylvie's love. He'd fallen for her completely, knowing it would never pay off. It might have been the only time in his life that he'd ever "taken a step forward."

He had worked up the courage precisely because he'd had nothing to lose. But now that he was afraid of losing her, the fear kept him frozen in place. The pleasure of his relationship with Sylvie might really have been as addictive as a drug to him.

And now that he knew his father had discovered everything, the threats terrified him and left him powerless.

As his son gasped in fear, the father did not think about how pitiful he was. Instead, he was satisfied: *Now that's the proper attitude.* His anger softening slightly, he smiled.

"Hmph. Either way, you're never to see Sylvie again. Of course, even if you were inclined to disobey, you may find it difficult to do so."

“What...?”

“Didn’t you find it odd that you hadn’t seen her at all today?”

As the meaning of his father’s words sank in, Gretto shouted in spite of himself. “Sylvie... Father! What have you done with Sylvie?!”

“I sold her to another noble. One you’ll have absolutely no influence over.”

“No... Not to that lecher on the hill?!”

“Mind your tongue, Gretto. No matter what sort of man he is, he is the lord of this town.”

Lord—when Gretto heard that word, a dark cloud briefly covered his vision.

Esperanza Boroñal.

He was a nobleman who’d been granted the title of “count” by the Spanish royal court and who governed this small city as his territory. The town of Lotto Valentino should have been under the jurisdiction of the viceroy of Naples, but due to some peculiar circumstances at play, it had been specially placed under his jurisdiction instead.

His unique appearance had made him an object of scorn among the aristocrats, who called him the Clown Count. Here, he was despised even more for his alleged satyriasis.

It was said that he had hardly any male servants in his mansion and that he’d collected a large harem of maids for himself. Gretto’s brother, Maiza, had called the lord a rake, and while Gretto had outwardly shown due deference, he had despised the count for as long as he could remember as a greedy snake who spent his wealth collecting women.

When he heard that Sylvie had been sold to such a man, anxiety, fear, and anger welled up inside him. The idea of that buffoon of a

lord having his way with Sylvie sent a powerful wave of nausea up from the pit of his stomach.

“How could you...? Father, have you no mercy?!”

“Mercy? You say I have no mercy? Don’t be a fool! Few men are as merciful as I am! Be grateful that sow didn’t end up dead! But I cannot even guarantee that if you continue to defy me. I can always buy Sylvie back from the lord and do away with her on the way home. It would be a simple matter to lay the blame on the Mask Makers.”

“How dare you! How dare you even suggest it, Father... What about my brother? You’re too frightened of him to do anything like this to him!”

Having no way of resisting his father personally, Gretto instinctively brought up Maiza. The thought of his own cowardice and immaturity nearly made him despair, but his anger at his father’s treatment of Sylvie won the battle inside him.

His father slammed a hand down onto his desk and shouted furiously back at him.

“Silence! Do not speak of Maiza! I thought he’d finally learned some human decorum, and then he abandoned himself to that alchemy nonsense... Don’t you understand that I’m keeping unworthy pests away from you because I consider *you* my heir?!”

“You are in no position to talk! Not when you destroyed the town with the drug those alchemists made!”

“Enough! Alchemists are mere tools! A son of Avaro attempting to become one is a risible idea! ...I don’t have time for this foolish argument! You are forbidden to leave this mansion until I change my mind! You are not to set a foot outside, do you understand?!”

“Father, wait! I love Sylvie! I’m serious!”

“Oh, you’re *serious*, are you? That changes nothing, you idiot!”

No sooner had he shouted those words than the head of the House of Avaro summoned his servants. Gretto refused to back down until he was removed from the room by force.

Heaven help me. That whelp’s still just a boy; he can’t even tell the difference between sexual gratification and marriage. Blathering on about love... Ridiculous.

Afterward, the Avaro patriarch irritably tapped the end of his pen on his desk.

Maiza has no respect for me, and he tends to underestimate the barriers between the nobility and the rabble, as Father did. I mustn’t let him inherit. Gretto has merely let his lust get the better of him. If I discipline him now, I expect he’ll maintain his dignity as a nobleman...unless Maiza interferes.

Maiza... He may be my son, but he’s nothing but a nuisance.

Before long, he stopped tapping on the desk and murmured something very unpaternal.

“I wish he’d go on a journey and never return.”



The port

“What the hell? Is this a joke?”

Out in the sea wind, Victor was standing stunned. He was not merely astonished; he was appalled.

“It can’t be much of a shock, surely,” Szilard murmured dully, chiding the younger man. “Our employer is the sort who *goes to extremes*. You must have been aware.”

“I know that, old man, but this isn’t simply impressive. It’s ludicrous.”

“Everything looks ludicrous when taken to extremes.”

As the two conversed, they stared at an odd sight.

They were looking at ships.

They were large vessels—warships. But if that was all they were, no one would have been surprised or appalled. The problem was how many and where.

Several dozen ships of the largest class in Spain covered half the harbor, to the point where they were all Victor could see.

That wasn’t all. Even more ships were lined up behind the ones moored to the pier, burying the port itself. The ships had been specially modified to connect to each other, building an entirely different structure with this fleet as its foundation.

Far later, Victor would look back on this memory.

Lemme see, it was like, uh, Kowloon Walled City? ...Infinite annexes and additions? I mean, it wasn’t that chaotic... Imagine the same thing, only logical. Like a ridiculously huge ship or a floating fortress. Technically, I think Kowloon Walled City was just a regular fortress back then, but whatever.

At the time, Victor couldn’t possibly have formed that impression. He was simply stunned by the indescribable sight in front of him.

“What in—? What is this? It’s on water, isn’t it? What do they do about the waves?!”

Waves were rising and falling below each of the ships, but the ships themselves didn’t appear to be moving. However, when he looked at the fleet as a whole, it did seem to be moving gently. It was probably safe to consider it one ultra-gigantic ship made by combining several dozen ordinary vessels.

...Just as he was about to come to that conclusion, Victor shook his head hard.

“No, no, no, no! That’s just absurd! Isn’t this too heavy to float? What about high and low tides? What if a storm comes through? Won’t it fall to pieces? There are so many things wrong with this monstrosity, I’d never stop listing them!”

The sight in front of him was like a house of cards, ready to fall apart and sink at any moment. Actually, for the sake of his nerves, it might have been better if it did. As he was thinking these things, a woman spoke beside him.

“My apologies, Victor. We use this structure, and even we don’t understand how it’s put together.”

At a glance, the woman could have been mistaken for a man. Her face wasn’t especially masculine, but her short-cropped hair and men’s clothing made an impression on people when they first met her.

Her name was Carla Alvarez Santoña, and she was the leader of the envoy that had been dispatched by the influential Spanish noble family, the House of Dormентаire.

At present, she was in charge of supervising the Dormентаire personnel who were staying in town, and she was already acquainted with Victor and Szilard.

“O-oh? You don’t know either, then, Carla? Who designed this ridiculous hulk?”

Victor had always known Carla was a woman, and nothing about her appearance struck him as strange. However, he remembered scoffing at her and paying for it dearly when they first met, and he still had a tendency to lose his nerve around her.

“An engineer from the Strassburg family. Our orders were to build according to his design, and we simply followed the instructions. Even those on site don’t have a full grasp of the engineering behind it...”

“Ah, the mechanist from that island up north. I know his name.” Victor knew he worked with technologies that were slightly different to the ones alchemists used. He shrugged and surveyed the structure again. “I see. If he can come up with this monstrosity, he’s even more of a madman than the rumors say. What do you think, old man?”

“I think your astonishment is unwarranted. The power of the Dormentaires made this a reality. That is what is worthy of your awe.” Clacking his walking stick against the ground, Szilard questioned Carla regarding another matter. “And? Haven’t those Mask Maker fellows been apprehended yet?”

“We’ve caught several apparent members, but they’re all just ruffians. No one seems to know who the leaders really are.”

“...Ruffians, hmm? Did someone who would associate with ruffians really make this?” Szilard took a gold coin from his purse.

To be accurate, it wasn’t a gold coin, but a counterfeit made from a material that bore an extraordinary resemblance to gold.

The Mask Makers were the shadow side of Lotto Valentino. The mission of the Dormentaire representatives here was to analyze the manufacturing method of this false gold, which was said to have been made by someone in that organization, and secretly steal the technique for House Dormentaire. Szilard and Victor had been sent to perform the analysis.

“Yes, that’s nearly certain. The drug was originally made by a nearby alchemist, working on commission for some members of the nobility; at present, there’s almost none in circulation. Over the past year, the amount of collected gold has also been gradually dwindling.”

In response to Carla’s report, Victor shrugged. “Meaning the alchemist who was doing the metallurgy is either dead or long gone.”

“He may merely be lying low. Either way, our work begins only after your people unearth a clue. Until then, we shall do as we please,”

Szilard told Carla. He promptly boarded the ship, leaving his companion behind.

As Victor watched him go, he sighed. “‘Do as we please,’ he says. With the town draped in Dormентаire flags, it’s as if we never left home.”

Then he noticed that some of the House Dormентаire men scattered across the port were wearing anachronistic metal armor.

“For God’s sake. Did this town never leave the Middle Ages? What is this, the set for a play?”

“...You may not be entirely wrong about that.”

“What?”

“Aside from the theater, there is no entertainment in this town,” Carla murmured as a shadow fell across her face. The word *play* seemed to have some special meaning for her.

Victor didn’t press her for an explanation. Instead, he asked her a question, his own face tensing slightly. “Never mind all that. I’m going to take a little stroll around town. Any local taboos I should be aware of? I don’t want to start any trouble if I can help it.”

“There appear to be several things the townspeople would rather not talk about, but...from our perspective, there’s only one rule that could prove troublesome. Although I doubt you’ll need to worry about it, Victor.”

“Hmm?”

After a little hesitation, Carla averted her eyes slightly and went on.

“Don’t show contempt for women in front of the lord. That is all.”



The Boroñal mansion Lotto Valentino

Lotto Valentino's elevation increased rapidly from the sea to farther inland.

The residences of the aristocrats were built at a slightly higher elevation than the rest of the town, their fine mansions proudly overlooking the commoners. At least, until a year ago.

At present, the mansions seemed to have retreated onto their hill, fearful of the town glaring back at them after the Dormентаire intrusion.

All except for one grand, towering manor that was unswayed by the mood of the town—the residence of its lord, Esperanza Boroñal.

Around the predominantly white manor were landscaped gardens that harmonized beautifully with the views of the town, creating an environment so fantastical that fairies and other creatures would be right at home flitting about.

Still, it wasn't fairies that were hard at work inside the manor, but its multitude of servants. The majority of those servants were women, who created a charming atmosphere around the manor as a whole, becoming part of its ornate scenery as they toiled away at their tasks.

However...

At present, a girl was standing in front of its gate with a gloomy expression that didn't match the manor's atmosphere.

The clothes she wore weren't suited for an aristocrat's mansion, and yet her spectacles were very obviously expensive.

Her name was Sylvie Lumiere. Until just yesterday, she'd been a servant of the Avaros, who lived a good distance away.

Starting today, she would be living and working here, in a manor even larger than her former place of employment. Ordinarily, one might assume this was cause for rejoicing.

But anxiety churned in her heart. Half of it was because of the master of this mansion and his lecherous reputation. The other half was worry about Gretto Avaro.

Sylvie and Gretto weren't simply a servant and her master's younger son. They were a man and woman who were passionately devoted to each other. In a word, they were lovers.

Their love was forbidden by class boundaries, and perhaps that sense of impropriety had generated a pleasant tension between them. For better or for worse, they had been bound together by a love that had left them intensely dependent on each other—until Gretto's father summarily severed it.

Having become aware of their relationship, the head of the House of Avaro had forced all the blame onto Sylvie and used his aristocratic connections to sell her off to the Boroñal residence.

It was essentially human trafficking, but almost no one saw it as a problem. This was less a product of the era than the town's own vice; until a few years ago, the slave trade had been normal among the ordinary residents of Lotto Valentino, and hardly anyone would bat an eye over the sale of a single servant to another aristocrat.

As a servant, she hadn't been able to defy her master. To make matters worse, he'd told her, *What can a nobody like you do for Gretto? You'll only weaken his status and make him miserable.* And that she couldn't deny.

It was something she'd wondered about herself. If their relationship continued, would she only destroy Gretto's happiness?

Gretto had said a way would open for them someday, somehow, if they just waited, but Sylvie wasn't such an optimist. And once she knew the truth, she wasn't wicked enough to ignore it for the sake of her own pleasure.

This was a good opportunity.

Gretto had spoken gently to someone of her low station.

From that moment until now, her life had been a dream—both a kind and a cruel one.

What frightened her was the idea that Gretto's father might be punishing him somehow. That anxiety and those last remnants of the dream lingered inside her, but she had no way to know for sure.

Even if she had been certain, it was doubtful whether she could have stopped it.

“.....”

As Sylvie looked up at the mansion once again, her expression was clouded with doubt.

Behind her was an Avaro carriage—and several sturdy men, Avaro messengers, who stood in front of it to keep an eye on her. They were watching to make sure she didn't run for it instead of entering the mansion.

No one had bound her hands and feet to bring her here, but one of the more vulgar messengers had leered at her. *We were told we could do whatever we wanted with you if you tried to run. We'd love for you to try it*, he'd said. She was timid, and the remark had become a psychological chain that immobilized her.

The manor of the lord who was said to keep a veritable harem of women.

Sylvie had heard that rumor as well, and to her, the high wall and sturdy gate seemed intended more to prevent escape than to keep out invaders.

Before long, someone would come to fetch her, and that gate would open. Once she stepped through it, she would not be able to leave easily.

But even if I did...I wouldn't be able to see Gretto again...

If she did see him, wouldn't it only make the situation worse? They still had no solution, so wouldn't she only bring him more unnecessary misery?

Various thoughts rose into her mind and vanished again.

It was a dream. I'll just pretend it was all a dream.

Standing still in front of the gate, Sylvie desperately tried to convince herself that it had never been realistic for someone of Gretto's station to treat her as an equal. She'd forget everything. Start a new life. They were doomed from the start.

Simply thinking such things was easy.

However, when she tried to act on it, to believe that it was the right course of action, her memories of Gretto got in the way.

The moment she emptied her heart, endless waves of regret poured in.

I still haven't...

I didn't even tell Gretto good-bye...

Seeing him would only have made it harder to leave, she knew, but she couldn't stop trembling.

As she stared at the ground and shivered, the Avaro men called to her.

"I'm sure you know already, but you really shouldn't try to escape from the mansion."

"You're not the only one who'll be punished. There's no telling what the family head will do to young Master Gretto."

"...I...I know." Even her voice was trembling, and she couldn't enunciate properly.

She tried to force a smile so that they wouldn't be suspicious—but her throat tightened, and a dull ache kept her expression from changing.

Gretto.

Forget.

I'm sorry, I—I...

*F
o
r
g
e
t
.*

I haven't repaid you for anything...

Forget.

I don't want this.

Forget everything.

No, I can't do that.

*You should forget now, for
Gretto's sake as well.*

.....

She had to wipe out everything; she had to forget all of it. She told herself over and over, but the belief that it couldn't be true was like a weight suppressing that line of thought. In the end, she didn't even know which of the two was correct, and she was bound by an invisible chain in front of the gate.

The weight of those contradictory thoughts slowly squeezed her heart until it began going numb.

Her expression crumpled, and she began to cry. As she twitched, trying to fight back the tears, one of her guards appeared to notice and spoke from behind her.

His words were far from comforting.

“Now, now, no crying. We can’t have people gossiping that we sold an unwilling woman to the lord for money. Just you try getting him to fire you on the spot. I really don’t know what the lord would do to young Master Gretto then,” he said quietly. He leaned back against the carriage, wearing a sadistic smile.

A new emotion welled up inside Sylvie—not the hot flames of anger, but the murky black thorns that were best termed *hatred*, an emotion she had no way to vent.

Why had Gretto’s father sold her off to this man? He wanted more than to tear her away from his son. If he’d only banished her, Gretto might have persisted in trying to see her. And she might not have given up on him.

But what if she was violated by a man who outranked the House of Avaro—by the governor of the town itself?

As Sylvie realized this was a hideous scheme to separate them both physically and emotionally, a quiet hatred was born in her heart—but right now, she didn’t even know who to turn it on.

That included herself, for accepting this flow of events without a fight, and for being capable of nothing but resentment and grief.

“Can I talk to you for a moment?”

Someone was speaking to her from behind.

Enough already. Don’t fill my head with more worries.

“Hello? Um, hello?”

Even as Sylvie replied in her mind, she realized that the voice speaking to her didn't belong to any of her guards.



It might be a messenger from the lord's mansion. She turned, forgetting to wipe away the tears that had pooled in her eyes.

There she saw a young man who seemed to be a little older than she was.

"Oh, that expression doesn't suit you at all. It would be better if you smiled."

"...Huh?"

It was a random thing to say, and she couldn't understand what he meant. Somewhat dazed, Sylvie took another look at the young man.

He wasn't particularly handsome or especially ugly; there was nothing striking about his face at all. Nothing except his bright smile, even when she was desperately trying to hold back tears. Rather than irritating her, it made her feel oddly unsettled.

Sylvie didn't recognize him at all, and she was frozen. In her place, one of the guards called to him.

"You, boy. Are you connected to this mansion?"

"Well, something like that. Spera...er, His Excellency called me again today, so I came by."

"Perfect timing. Show this maid into the mansion, would you? She's new. She'll be working here starting today."

"Oh, I see. *His Excellency loves girls, so I'm sure he'll be thrilled.*"

What a cruel thing to say with that smile on his face. Sylvie flinched, while the guards climbed back into the carriage with expressions that said, *That's one job over and done with.*

Then, once they'd seen the smiling young man open the gate, one said, "She's all yours," and the carriage set off.

But I'm still outside.

Startled at how sloppy the guards had been about their job—they hadn't even asked the young man's name—Sylvie realized this might be her last chance.

Could I trick him and make a run for it?

...And then what?

However, her thoughts found themselves back in the same old dead end. No matter how perfect a chance presented itself, she was incapable of seizing it.

As she stood there, petrified, the young man spoke to her.

"What's the matter? You don't want to go in?" he asked candidly, and Sylvie faltered.

"U-um, I..."

"Oh! That's right, I haven't introduced myself yet. Of course you're suspicious. Wouldn't normally expect to find someone like me in a lord's manor, would you?"

"N-no, I don't suspect you!"

She hastily tried to deny it, but the man talked over her with his own self-introduction.

"I'm Elmer. Elmer C. Albatross. It's good to meet you."

As the young man spoke, he was still wearing that carefree smile.

Caught in his momentum, Sylvie responded in spite of herself. "I'm Sylvie...Lumiere." Her voice was so soft it was almost inaudible.

But the young man had heard, and his smile grew even bigger. "I see! That's a lovely name! So, what do you want to do now?"

"Huh?"

What do I want to do?

The abrupt remark hadn't made any sense, and for a moment, Sylvie stopped crying entirely.

"I'd like to start by asking why you look so sad, but I won't force you to talk about it if you don't want to. I just thought I might be able to help you out with whatever it is that you want to do next."

?

???

Until a moment ago, Sylvie's mind had been filled with sadness, regret, and hatred, and now those emotions were being beaten down by a parade of question marks. Elmer's comments were too sudden for her to easily parse his intent.

"Um, wh-what do you...mean?"

"About what?"

"'About what?' ...Erm, we've only just met, haven't we?"

"Really? Well, that's not important. Let's start with a simple question. Two choices: Do you want to work at this mansion or not?"

The young man kept on speaking at his own leisure, then shut his mouth and waited patiently for the girl's answer.

"I don't...want to work here..." Sylvie didn't know what she should say, and she unwittingly told the truth. "Oh! B-but it's not as if I dislike the mansion. It's only, um... If I work here, there's someone I won't be able to see again..."

When she'd gotten that far, she hastily shut her mouth.

She knew bringing up Gretto's name would cause an awful lot of trouble. On the other hand, she also understood that she was weak when people pressed her, and she wasn't confident she could effectively hide the truth if he pursued the issue.

The timid girl began to tear up again while Elmer beamed at her.

“Ah, I see. Shall we go, then?”

“Huh?”

The young man had abruptly taken her hand. Bewildered, Sylvie tried to resist, but—

“You want to see this person, don’t you? It’s fine, don’t worry! I’ll make up something for Speran—er, the lord—and I won’t tell a soul who it is you want to see!”

“...!”

Then, spotting a maid who was working in the garden, Elmer shouted to her. “Oh! Hi there. This girl says she’ll be starting work here today, but I’m borrowing her for a bit!”

The maid turned their way, giggled, and shouted back. “My, my! It’s nice to be young, isn’t it? I’ll tell His Excellency for you, so just relax and go enjoy yourselves!”

“Thanks!” Elmer waved to her vigorously, then turned back to Sylvie and grinned. “There, see? Problem solved. Now it’s my fault you’ve gone outside.”

“.....”

Things were going so smoothly that Sylvie was bewildered, and she followed the young man, blinking in astonishment. He was so bold and forceful; she watched him curiously, thinking that he was a completely different type of person from Gretto.

But she would never develop any inclinations to be unfaithful or believe he was some destined replacement for Gretto.

Although she did think he and Gretto were different types—the young man’s proactiveness gave her the same eerie, vaguely inhuman feeling that she’d gotten when she’d first seen his smile.

“So, who is this person you want to see? If you’d rather not say, just tell me where you need to go, and I’ll help you get there.”

Even though Elmer had asked her, she couldn’t bring herself to give Gretto’s name to someone who unsettled her so. That said, she also couldn’t work up the courage to tell him to leave her alone. For the moment, Sylvie chose to give him the information in a roundabout way.

“Um, do you know the Avaro mansion? I worked there until yesterday...” As Sylvie wondered what she could say next to put him off the track—

“Oh, Maiza’s home? Of course I know it,” he answered easily, so easily that Sylvie was bewildered again.

“You’re acquainted with Master Maiza?!”

Maiza Avaro, the nobleman who was her lover’s older brother.

The moment she heard his name, it was like a shock in Sylvie’s heart.

This young man, Elmer, was dressed as a commoner, but could he be a member of the nobility after all? Sylvie couldn’t hide her surprise.

The mysterious youth went on nonchalantly. “Well, I guess I know him a little... Huh? Wait, is Maiza the one you want to see?”

The familiar way Elmer spoke of Maiza gave Sylvie a glimmer of hope. The vague uncanny feeling hadn’t faded. She couldn’t put complete confidence in him, and yet...

“Oh, no... It isn’t Master Maiza... It’s his brother, Gre...Master Gretto.”

Her answer was rather incoherent, and she was flustered at having accidentally said Gretto’s name as the young man overwhelmed her again. But she’d come too far to turn back now.

“Master Gretto has...been very good to me up till now, and I desperately wanted to thank him...”

That’s a lie. I don’t want to thank him. I don’t want to tell him good-bye.

I want to run away with him.

Sylvie was considering a more active plan than Gretto was.

No, that’s wrong!

I don’t care about running, or what happens after this!

I just...I just want to see him!

She didn’t say these private thoughts aloud. She only let those strong emotions show through in her voice as she spoke.

“No matter what... No matter what, I want to see him. Just once, before I go to work at the lord’s mansion...I want to see him!”

When Elmer heard that, he paused for a moment, then asked her a question:

“Only once?”

“Huh?”

“Will that satisfy you enough to let you smile? ...Oh, sorry. Maybe you’re thinking ‘Nobody asked you’ or ‘This has nothing to do with you,’ but, well... It’s kind of an important issue. It’s going to affect how enthusiastic I am about this.”

The young man was making as little sense as ever, and Sylvie looked perplexed.

“That’s, um... I don’t think I’ll know until I’ve seen him... I’m sorry.” She hadn’t done anything wrong, and yet her apology seemed completely sincere.

“Oh, sorry, I’m sorry! You’re completely right! You certainly won’t know until you see him! Well then, I’ll work hard to make sure it’s the best meeting ever! ...So cheer up? Smile, smile!”

Leading Sylvie by the hand, Elmer went on smiling. A little ways from the gate, he examined the road around them and thought to himself. “Let’s see... In that case, um... Maiza’s seemed to be sort of busy with Maestro Dalton lately, so... Oh, right! I think I know some people who may be able to get into his house!” he cried happily, then broke into a run, pulling Sylvie along behind him.

She trotted unsteadily down the unfamiliar road after him. The rather comical pair looked a bit out of place in a town controlled by the House of Dormентаire.

However, their meeting, and the actions they took thereafter, would have important consequences for Lotto Valentino.

Maiza Avaro.

The moment the name of their common acquaintance had come up, the gears of the pair’s relationship had meshed and begun turning powerfully.

That was how Elmer C. Albatross and Sylvie Lumiere first met.

And their meeting was only the first of several encounters that would occur that day.

Would those meetings and reunions bring fortune or misfortune?

The results were something no one could predict, but—

—at that moment, the shadows of Lotto Valentino began their work.

Interlude—Victor Talbot's Report (Excerpt)

This report is a copy of a document I have already dispatched by mail. I do not know who may read it, but there is a matter of which I wish to inform them in advance. As this report has been preserved in its original form, the language used is extremely informal.

However, please don't misunderstand—I am not the sort of person who would use such language in an official report.

This report is a special one, as it is also a letter to a trusted individual with whom I am already well acquainted, and it is composed of rather light, casual prose.

Therefore, even if this document becomes public after my death—let it be understood that it is, at most, no more than my personal composition. I have not the slightest intent to diminish the authority of the House of Dormентаire, nor to insult the family of my employers.

Please bear this in mind as you read on.

Hey, how've you been?

Have you been lonely without me and my letters?

You've been pestering me so much for a report, so here I am, writing you one. You know old Szilard's report will be stiff as a board, so I'll just write mine the way I always do.

I'll bet you like it better that way, too, don't you? It'll be more like talking to me.

Next time you can't sleep, read it and imagine me by your pillow.

Well, now for the report.

We made it to the town in good time, but what the hell is that ridiculous piece of work out on the ocean? Strassburg is even more of a mad genius than I'd heard. And so are you Dormentaires for bringing that leviathan to life.

(Omitted)

As for the town itself, it was nothing like what I expected.

I've only been here a day, but let me get to the heart of it:

This town is bloody insane.

I'm reporting this opinion in an official capacity.

When I first saw it from horseback, I actually felt sorry for them. I'd assumed some miscreants had been making those counterfeits and drugs beneath the noses of an incompetent ruling class, and now the House of Dormentaire was coming to rain down hell. I thought the poor bastards had lost their town because of a few bad apples.

But when night fell and I met the spy, [] (n.b.: the name of the spy was not copied), and got more of the details, I could hardly believe what I was hearing.

The ones making drugs were the ordinary townsfolk. Just regular people. Bloody hell. Can you believe it?

Apparently, it started when one alchemist made the drug on orders from an aristocrat named Avaro. Nobody knows where the original went or how it spread, but then the townspeople started making a cheap imitation.

Every damn person, from the sailors in port to old ladies selling vegetables, was in on the plan. They bought children from slave traders and made them work and breathe in the smoke until they lost their minds and died!

When I asked how many had died, [] seemed frustrated. He said, "If I'd started working as a spy sooner, I might've saved a lot of those

children.” I think he’s taking it too seriously. If we’d found out sooner, you would’ve stepped in earlier and stolen the drug concessions, wouldn’t you? If you’d left it to me, I’d never have used child slaves. Old Szilard might have tried, but I’d have flogged him before he could.

Although, if you’d left it to me, I’d have been against the drug to begin with, as I’m sure you already know. Stuff like opium, say; what the hell’s so much fun about filling your brain with fog? I know it has its uses in medicine, but really.

Come to think of it, I met an alchemist named Begg in town today. Says he only makes drugs. From what I hear, he’s the original creator of that drug, the one commissioned by that aristocrat. I don’t think I’ll ever like him.

Still, he’s a colleague of []’s, so I’ll keep those thoughts to myself in front of him.

By the way, did you know all this already? The spy should have sent you a report, too.

So you should know that this town is a barrel full of bad apples, and it’s actually the aristocrats who are ethical and decent.

If you assumed I was going to cause a scene, you drastically underestimated me. But the whole thing makes me ill, damnably so.

If I’d known before I came here, I might not have wanted to come at all. After I heard about it, I thought the whole damn town should try being enslaved for a while.

It was all so...foul. A truly sickening story.

I don’t know how much you know, but at the Meyer family that [] works for, there’s a servant girl named Niki. Would you believe it—she was one of the slaves back then. She told me all about it without hiding a whit of it, as if it didn’t affect her at all. But I think it was so painful that she had to maintain that distance to be able to speak of it at all. She may be younger than me, but I was impressed by her strength.

Oh, but don't you worry. You're a finer woman than she is. I'd never let my eyes wander, even if you do have a different man or woman in your bed every night.

Ah, I'm digressing. Actually, I'm digressing on purpose.

What Niki told me was so revolting that I wouldn't be able to bring myself to write about it if I didn't interject a joke or two.

So I'm writing it one more time. I want to emphasize this.

All the adults in Lotto Valentino are rotten bastards.

...And yet they walk around pretending to be decent people who committed their crimes to survive. They're ugly, tedious, and irredeemably vile.

Well, maybe there are a few exceptions. As a matter of fact, from what the spy says, not everyone was involved.

According to the spy, the lady who runs the patisserie partway up the hill categorically refused to have anything to do with that lot. I may go over and buy some sweets from her tomorrow. If they stand a chance of surviving the journey, I'll send you some next time.

I'm digressing again, but I'm here in the midst of nameless ordinary townsfolk who don't understand their crimes. It's sickening.

What I was hoping to find was something out of some heroic drama, an evil secret society, and I'd expose their dastardly deeds myself.

When I told old Szilard about it, he wouldn't stop mocking me.

What's wrong with that, though? Alchemists can dream, can't they?

Well, my travelogue isn't what you want to know, is it?

I think Carla's report will contain most of the same information, so I'll keep mine more subjective than hers.

Today, there was an incident.

Ironically, from what they tell me, this is the one-year anniversary of the day the House of Dormентаire's ship was set on fire. I'm currently investigating whether that's got anything to do with it. Look forward to my reports from next week on, but all I can report in this letter is the fact that an incident occurred.

I wasn't sure where I should start my story, but I'll begin with what happened at noon.

After Carla and I parted ways, I took a stroll through the port district, and I ran into a couple of extremely odd fellows.

I'm not sure how to explain... They were foreign, yes, and their skin was a different color from mine, but I don't mean any of that. They were just...weird.



CHAPTER 2

THE VISITORS' PLEASANT CHAT

CHAPTER 2: THE VISITORS' PLEASANT CHAT

Lotto Valentino The port market

Around the time Elmer took Sylvie's hand and started running—
—at the port, a certain incident was about to occur.

A deafening noise.

That afternoon, a sound reminiscent of falling rubble echoed across the market.

Taken by surprise, everyone turned to look. Meanwhile, the people who'd been watching the source of the noise gave little shrieks and turned away from the scene.

The cause of the noise was a person.

With the speed of a gliding hawk, a knight in thick plate armor had crashed into a material storage site. The wooden shelves collapsed noisily, sending out a moderate wave of destruction into his surroundings.

Naturally, the man hadn't dived into the shelves voluntarily. Someone had *thrown* an armored adult at them as if he weighed next to nothing.

“.....”

The man responsible stood tall in the market, without a word. His skin was brown, and he was obviously foreign. He seemed to be anywhere from his midtwenties to thirty or so, but since he and his two companions were from overseas, the people around them weren't as familiar with how to judge their ages.

And those people weren't interested in observing the men more closely, instead falling over themselves trying to get out of there.

This wasn't because they were afraid of the physical strength of the man who'd thrown the knight, or of what he'd actually done. It was because they'd seen that the knight's armor bore the Dormентаire crest.

If he was intentionally walking around in armor in this day and age, when musketeers were more common than swordsmen, this was probably intended as a demonstration of power by the House of Dormентаire. The townspeople were aware of this, so when they saw armored knights on patrol, very few approached them for any purpose other than to sell them something.

The only reason they hadn't moved until they saw the crest was due entirely to the thought that nobody could possibly be stupid enough to pick a fight with somebody from the House of Dormентаire. It was simply common sense. But an outsider had indeed picked a fight with one of the knights, so almost no one even considered staying to watch. After all, if they were careless enough to get involved, they might be punished unfairly.

"Ghk... Gah...!"

The knight got up from the debris of the shelves, glaring at the brown-skinned man.

"You scoundrel... Do you know what you've done?" he asked in Spanish.

The other man cocked his head, his face still expressionless. Apparently, he didn't understand the language, but that didn't matter to the knight.

"You sailors may as well have spit on the House of Dormентаire! I don't know who you work for, but we'll destroy both you and your employer!" the knight shouted. He was still in pain, but he was trying to gain a mental advantage over the other man.

Drawn by his voice, several men rushed to the scene.

They were a diverse group, ranging from knights in the same sort of armor to men in guard uniforms with guns at their hips, but they all had the hourglass crest on their shoulders or collars.

“You may not be able to tell what I’m saying, but you understand your situation, correct?”

Certain that his advantage was unassailable, the wounded knight smiled as he faced down the brown-skinned man.

“Who is this man? What happened?”

In response to his companion’s question, the wounded knight sent a hate-filled glare at the foreigner.

“How should I know?! The crazed bastard just kicked me across the way, out of nowhere!”

“Whaaat?!”

“What’s the meaning of this?”

“Don’t tell me they’re with the Mask Makers!”

The knights all asked their own questions, but the assailant didn’t respond.

He also made no move to run. Bold as ever, he stood facing down the group of knights and gunmen.

“Come with us.”

One of the knights carefully approached the man and grasped his arm, but—

“...? ...?!”

H-he’s not moving...

It was like tugging on a tree whose roots were firmly planted in the earth. If he wanted to move the man from that spot, he’d have to be strong enough to physically pick him up.

“Why, you...! Do you intend to resist?!” Impatient, one of the knights threw a punch at the man’s face.

However—the brown-skinned man countered it with a headbutt, and the knight was knocked into the air and rolled across the ground.

The next instant—

—the most lightly equipped of the assembled men drew a stiletto from his belt and started toward the foreigner.

The onlookers watching the scene play out from a safe distance were certain that the brown-skinned man was about to die.

The man was a member of Carla’s personal bodyguard, and his skills were beyond comparison with the knights around him. In addition, if a Dormентаire soldier fatally stabbed a sailor, they knew it wouldn’t cause any trouble.

But betraying their expectations, the foreigner evaded the stiletto by a hair.

The blade had grazed his throat, and finally, a hint of emotion showed on his face.

“<Well done.>”

He smiled faintly, muttering something in a foreign language.

With the momentum of his twisting torso, he tried to backfist his opponent, but the bodyguard nimbly dodged it, then signaled to one of his companions with a glance.

Without a word, the other bodyguard drew his sword and lunged at the darker man.

Now two blades were striking from different directions, but the mystery man avoided them at the last second and grabbed the arm of one of the bodyguards.

Then, twisting around with all his might—he threw the bodyguard with the strength of his arms alone.

He'd thrown the man at the other bodyguard.

But both of these men really did seem to be more skilled than the earlier knight: One lightly sidestepped his incoming companion, while the bodyguard who'd been thrown rolled on the ground to soften the impact and got to his feet.

The bodyguards and the brown-skinned man faced each other and stayed deadlocked at that same distance for a few moments.

The surrounding knights and gunmen shared glances, wondering whether they should join in—but before they could find their answer, the fight began again as the bodyguards and the foreigner closed in on each other rapidly.

But neither their fists nor their blades reached each other.

Two intruders came between them and blocked their attacks.

One of the men had black hair and olive skin, and he seemed to be Asian. His hands were clamped around both of the guards' wrists; the tips of the stilettos had stopped just short of sinking into his chest.

Meanwhile, the brown-skinned man's fist had been stopped by an even darker man, who'd put him in a nelson hold from behind.

"...It seems you failed to heed our warning, Nile," said the Asian man in faintly accented English.

The darker man spoke next. "Calm down. We did not come here to kill."

The man they'd called Nile *tsked* quietly, then spoke in stiff, formal English. "I believe I do not have to tell you, but let me just say this: ...Stay out of my way."

“It is you who are impeding us, Nile.” With a sigh, the Asian quietly opened both his hands and bowed to the bodyguards. “My companion has been very rude to you.”

Now that someone they could talk to had appeared, the bodyguards wordlessly sheathed their stilettos.

“Hmph. What a bore,” Nile grumbled, still in English, when he saw his opponents didn’t plan to continue the fight.

The bodyguards stayed silent; it wasn’t clear whether they’d understood what he said or not.

As if speaking in their stead, the knight who had been attacked raised his voice. “What country are you louts from?! Don’t think you’ll get away with this!”

Apparently, he was giving at least token consideration to diplomatic matters as he attempted to learn their affiliation.

In response, the Asian man—who wore a katana at his waist—frowned.

“While I am unsure how to respond to an inquiry regarding my country, my name is Denkurou Tougou. I am not under the protection of any particular nation.”

Denkurou Tougou was an alchemist who was studying under a master in Western Europe.

His was a checkered life. After being rescued by a trading vessel while he was adrift in the Far Eastern ocean, many subsequent twists and turns had led him to begin studying alchemy in Europe.

His master had sent him to Lotto Valentino with orders to contact an alchemist known as Dalton.

On his previous visit, he and his friend Zank had been on their own. The man they’d brought this time, Nile, was notorious among their fellow apprentices for his hot temper. Previously, Nile had developed

an intense anger against this town due to a certain matter. After that matter had been resolved, his fury seemed to have abated, so he had joined them at Denkurou's discretion, but—

The result had been this fight, just after they arrived in port.

Denkurou had taken his eyes off him for a moment, and he was ashamed of that error. Still, he held nothing against Nile. He was definitely violent, but Denkurou knew he wasn't the type to exercise that violence unfairly.

After introducing himself, Denkurou went on impassively, keeping an eye on the situation around them.

"Now then, would you explain what happened, Nile?"

Without looking the least bit apologetic, Nile gave the Dormентаire men a disdainful glance.

"It does not need to be said, but I will say it. I saw a fool who arrogantly kicked down a child and was about to stomp on his head. So I followed the man's example and kicked him. I have not yet stomped on him."

When Denkurou looked around, he saw a frightened boy watching them from the edge of the market.

If the knights insisted they had done nothing of the sort, that would be that. Even Denkurou, who'd just gotten here, knew the people of Lotto Valentino were afraid of the hourglass crest. If the townspeople and the child in question refused to talk out of fear, Nile would simply be treated as a bully.

Denkurou believed Nile was telling the truth, and apprehension held him in its grip—but barely two seconds later, his worries proved to be for nothing.

"Oh, shut up! What's wrong with kicking a brat who cut in front of me?!"

The man had confessed easily, and the feeling that went through Denkurou was half relief and half worry of a different sort.

Are they nobles of some variety? We had trouble with aristocrats the last time we came to this town as well. I would like to settle this peaceably if we can, but...

In Denkurou's homeland, there had been a custom that anyone who passed in front of a feudal lord's procession must be summarily cut down for their insolence. Therefore, he worried this town might have a similar law with regard to striking down rude individuals.

But the knights in front of him didn't appear to be conquerors with the status of a feudal lord or his procession. Even if they were aristocrats, they lacked dignity; the only ones who had anything resembling that character were the bodyguards who'd managed to stand against Nile a moment ago.

"Denkurou and Zank, you heard him. It is natural and proper for me to kick these men," Nile said.

It was an arrogant thing to say, and Denkurou realized, *If this man took a disliking to it, he might very well attack a feudal lord's procession all by himself.* He secretly hoped the man would never set foot in Japan.

In the past, Nile had blustered that he struck anyone who displeased him, no matter if they were an aristocrat or a royal, and he had actually done so a few times. The fact that he'd survived this long without being executed was partly due to Nile's own strength, but also in large part to the connections of their master.

Even if the knight who was shouting right now had been the son of a royal family, Nile would have only said, *No king would trample a young child,* and kicked him down with no hesitation.

Hmm. I would prefer not to cause trouble, but...

Remembering his fight at the port when he'd visited this area six years previously, he decided to accept the situation as fate.

"We have only just arrived here, you see. Our personal values do not allow us to overlook a knight kicking a child to the ground, but if that does not align with the values of those who live here, then we will apologize. We would prefer to settle things peacefully."

"What are you saying, Denkurou? This whole band of rabmmrglff."

Zank was even bigger than Nile, and he covered his companion's mouth to cut him off.

Denkurou was about to continue negotiating, when—

"Don't be a fool! After an insult like that, I won't be satisfied until I cut that man down!" the offended man shouted.

At the open hostility, Zank let go of Nile. "What will we do, Denkurou? I would not mind a bit of a skirmish here."

"I can't have you taking Nile's position as well, Zank," Denkurou replied with some exasperation as he weighed their options.

When they'd been involved in a fight here six years ago, Aile, the leader of a group of delinquent youths, had appeared and defused the situation. They weren't dealing with delinquents this time, though.

Denkurou wasn't knowledgeable about aristocrats, but even he knew the name of Dormентаire. It wasn't safe to quarrel with them.

He doubted an appearance from Aile, the leader of the town's thugs, would fix this situation.

Hmm. Should we force our way through? Suffer ourselves to be apprehended temporarily...?

The Dormентаire men did not immediately leap into a fight, perhaps watching to see what the three visitors would do as well.

But if the standoff continued, it was very likely that the numbers of the Dormентаire group would swell, worsening their disadvantage.

That was when a sound broke their deadlock.

It was a light, rhythmic noise: the sound of clapping.

“All right, all right, that’s enough of that. Stand down, all of you.”

The man who was walking toward them and clapping was someone Denkurou and the others had never seen before.

Meanwhile, the knights turned pale and respectful as soon as they recognized him.

“Master Victor! You’ve already arrived, sir?!”

“‘Master’? I’m nobody’s master. I’m just an alchemist. There’s no need for knights to bow to me,” he replied as he came closer, though the knights were no less deferential toward him.

An alchemist?

Denkurou, Nile, and Zank exchanged looks. Why were the knights being so respectful to a man who was in that line of work?

But before they could ask, this Victor fellow said, “Hello there. Are you sailors or merchants? I see you understand English. That makes things easier. I can speak Spanish and Italian, too, but English is easiest for me.”

Victor spoke casually, as if attempting to soften the mood.

Denkurou didn’t let his guard down completely, but he was a bit relieved to be talking to someone who wasn’t hostile. “I see. Well then, what will become of us now?”

Even if they were arrested for a time, if the one arresting them was this man, Denkurou had high hopes they could come to an agreement.

Somehow, this man reminds me of Aile, who quelled our previous fight here.

Having come to that conclusion, Denkurou mentally removed the option of force and resolved to hear the man out.

("It appears that we are fated to have someone stop our fights here. How perfect it would be if this happened a third time.")

Zank had spoken in Japanese, and Denkurou murmured his response in the same language.

("I would rather there not be a third fight at all...")

Victor waited until they'd finished their exchange, then went on.

"Nothing's going to become of you. Just go on with your work as if nothing happened."

A stir ran through the knights and gunmen, but when the bodyguards glanced at them, they all fell silent.

"Oh? Then you mean to look the other way?"

"No need. I've seen nothing in the laws of this town that explicitly allows people to kick each other to the ground. You kicked the knight, and the knight kicked the boy. Just pretend you didn't see each other. Now everyone is happy. How's that?" Victor smiled.

Possibly because Nile's anger was unsatisfied, he shot a glance at the knight and said something tactless. "Let me just ask this: Is there a law to the effect that one must *not* kick people down?"

Victor's response was simple. "There may not be a law, but it's not exactly a pastime for respectable people, is it? Especially hurting children."



Shrugging, Victor looked at the knight behind him with a sharp glare. The knight hastily looked down; his eyes seemed somehow afraid.

“They seem quite frightened of you.”

“Not of me. Of old Szilard.”

“Szilard?”

“Another Dormентаire alchemist. He’s not an unreasonable man, but he is intimidating. There’s a rumor that if you defy the House of Dormентаire’s personal alchemist, you may become a subject in human experiments.”

Victor spoke indifferently, but there wasn’t the slightest hint of laughter in the knights’ eyes.

It was likely that they genuinely believed that rumor. Either that, or it was more than a rumor.

They really wouldn’t be able to determine which it was without meeting this Szilard fellow in person, so Denkurou and his companions didn’t press the issue.

“You have our gratitude for your arbitration.”

“No need for all that. I just don’t want to deal with any trouble. Right, well, go on, then.”

“We are in your debt.” Denkurou started to leave, pulling Nile with him, but when he stole a glance at the child who’d been kicked by the knight, the start of the altercation, the boy seemed to want to say something to them.

But in the next moment, a woman who seemed to be his mother grabbed his hand and pulled him into the crowd. She probably didn’t want to get involved with outsiders who’d picked a fight with the House of Dormентаire.

When Denkurou turned back, Nile was watching the pair go with no emotion on his face. When he realized his companions were watching him, he gave a thin smile and began walking.

Well, I doubt Nile was hoping to be recompensed; he may have simply wanted to fight.

Nile had acted entirely of his own volition, and it was only natural for the mother to try to protect her child. On that thought, he began walking again.

However—

“Oi, you over there. The woman with the boy. Hold on.”

As the parent and child began to make a hasty exit, Victor called to them.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“I-I’m terribly sorry! My son was outrageously rude a moment ago!”

Shaking, the woman knelt and tried to force her son to apologize as well.

Denkurou and the other two stopped, worrying there might be another scene.

“No, not that,” said Victor. “What’s it to us if you apologize? If you know he was rude ‘a moment ago,’ you must have been watching the whole thing. Which means you saw a man kick your son, and you didn’t even help him, much less try to protect him. You can keep your damn mouth shut.”

After he’d rebuked the woman, he bent down in front of the boy, putting himself on his eye level.

“Hey. You’ve got something to say to that scary-looking bloke over there, don’t you?” Victor indicated Nile with a glance.

The boy watched him, unsure what to do.

“Go say what you want to say. You’ve got my permission. All right?” Victor urged him, smiling kindly.

The boy trotted up to Nile and blurted out, “Thank you very much!” He’d spoken in Italian, but Nile probably understood the sentiment being expressed.

He raised one eyebrow as if he was startled. Then he murmured a brief reply in English. “It was nothing.” After that, he turned his back on the boy.

The remark had been brusque, but as his longtime acquaintances, Denkurou and Zank understood that Nile was embarrassed. They exchanged smiles.

I see.

So even the House of Dormентаire has men such as this.

Turning to Victor again, Denkurou bowed to him. “I thank you for your consideration.”

“I wasn’t doing it for you lot. I only thought it might be eating away at him,” Victor replied. He seemed to have taken a liking to Denkurou and the others, and he raised a hand to them lightly, glancing at an inn on the outskirts of the port.

At present, the building had been reserved exclusively for the House of Dormентаire, and it had been remodeled into a military outpost.

“I spend my nights over there. If anything comes up, stop by and tell me about—”

Just as he was finishing his sentence—

A deafening noise.

The second loud sound of the day echoed through the market.

However, unlike the earlier one, it reached more than one small area.

The air itself shook with the violent explosion, and the noise raced all through the town.

The explosion had come from the very inn Victor had just pointed out. Part of the wall on the second floor had crumbled, and flames and black smoke rose from the building.

In the center of the market, which was now in an uproar, Victor muttered in a daze to the other three men.

“...Sorry. Seems I’m not staying there after all.”

This was how Victor and Denkurou’s group met.

And it also marked the beginning of a chain of incidents that would rock the town of Lotto Valentino.



Meanwhile In the heart of town, in front of the Meyer residence

“Huh? What was that noise?”

“It sounded like someone fired a cannon...”

At the sound of the explosion from the port, Elmer and Sylvie stopped in front of the wooden door.

But no other sounds followed it, and the buildings around the passage where they stood blocked their view of the smoke.

They didn’t know about the explosion at the port market, and although they were bewildered, they didn’t leave to try to find out what the noise had been.

After all, they’d just used the door knocker.

While they were still perplexed by the noise, the door opened, and a serving woman poked her head out.

“...Oh. It’s just you, Elmer,” muttered a girl about the same age as Sylvie. Her face was expressionless. But as she looked from Elmer to

Sylvie and back, her eyes narrowed slightly. “Is she your lover?” she asked indifferently.

“Huh?!” Startled, Sylvie followed the girl’s gaze—and only then did she realize Elmer was still holding her hand.

When they’d reached the house he’d seemed to be heading for, she’d tried to shake herself free, until the loud noise had distracted her.

“N-no!”

Hastily, Sylvie yanked her hand free. Immediately afterward, she felt guilty for two separate reasons.

The first was guilt toward Gretto, for letting a stranger pull her along by the hand. The other was having violently pulled her hand away, when the young man had brought her here out of kindness.

At the very least, the youth didn’t seem to mind. He was smiling at the serving girl. “Aw, I’ve been rejected! Will you comfort me, Niki?”

“No, not when you haven’t even been hurt. Did you come here to act like a spoiled child?”

“Agh, now I’ve been rejected by two people at once.” Even as he deflated, his smile didn’t flicker, and he changed the subject easily.

“Oh, that’s right. I had a little favor to ask you today, Niki.”

“What?”

“I believe there’s an alchemist here who goes to Maiza’s home. There’s something I want to ask him about. Um, I’m pretty sure his name was...something... Mr. Something?”

Elmer was claiming he had something to discuss with a man whose name he’d completely failed to remember.

However, as if she was used to things like this, Niki sighed lightly. “You’ve talked to him a few times, haven’t you? It’s Begg. Begg Garrott.”

When she heard the name, Sylvie interjected in spite of herself. “What...? Is this Begg’s workshop?”

Begg Garrott.

Having worked for the House of Avaro until yesterday, Sylvie had shown an alchemist by that name to her master’s rooms a few times. The man had talked rapidly and volubly, and she vividly remembered how he would rattle off enough words to fill the script of a modest play in the time she took to show him in.

Sylvie had been dragged here without being told anything at all, and she finally understood what Elmer had meant when he’d mentioned people who could get into the Avaro house.

Elmer answered her blandly.

“Technically it’s the Meyer family’s workshop, not Begg’s.”

The Meyers were renowned alchemists, an illustrious family who’d had many apprentices. However, a few years earlier, the head of the family and his wife had died in an accident, and now the only surviving family member was a boy who was still quite young.

They had relocated to this house in Lotto Valentino.

They’d only moved in a few years ago, so their furnishings weren’t completely coordinated with the mansion yet—and the furniture wasn’t the only thing that didn’t quite seem at home. Czeslaw Meyer, the mansion’s young master, hadn’t integrated into the new town either, and his shyness was directed less at people in general than at the town itself.

This house served as both their living quarters and their studio, where several alchemists worked on the research they’d inherited

from their master. A peculiar smell drifted up the stairs leading to the cellar.

Elmer didn't have any connections to those alchemists. He only knew Niki, their servant—but for a servant, Niki seemed to have quite a bit of influence, and she immediately called Begg upstairs and made the introductions.

Czeslaw, the nominal family head, was currently out with another alchemist, so their talk was taking place under odd circumstances: a discussion of a tryst with the son of a town nobleman, held in a masterless mansion.

But Sylvie was a self-effacing type, and she couldn't object to any of it.

"I see, yes, I understand everything about what you've just told me. I'll tell you now before you become suspicious of me: I knew about young master Gretto and the young lady's relationship, but Maiza seemed to be keeping quiet about it, so I didn't betray your secret or anything like it, believe you me—but what exactly is it you need me to do?"

Begg Garrott, who had hardly paused for breath in his whole speech, was a man in his thirties with stubbly whiskers. His face looked patently unhealthy, and his eyes seemed rather hollow. Perhaps it was an effect of the drugs.

"Well, I was wondering if we could ask you to sneak a message to Gretto next time you go to the mansion. It might be better if you kidnapped him, really."

Even though Elmer had only just met this man, he spoke to him as if they'd known each other for ages. But Begg didn't seem to be the type who paid much attention to etiquette, either, and he responded rapidly.

“Whoa, whoa, if that’s what you want, it would be better to ask Maiza—but come to think of it, he’s terribly busy with the matter of the *Advena Avis* right now, so he almost never comes home. In that case, I’ll just have to...pitch in...and give...you...a—a hand...”

Abruptly, Begg’s speech faltered, like a clock whose spring had wound down.

As Sylvie began to panic, wondering what was wrong, he began to talk normally again.

“Ah, my apologies, my tongue’s begun stalling on me every so often; my guess is that it’s what comes of having tested too many of my drugs on myself, but if my body is a sacrifice I must make to perfect my research, it’s a small price to pay. All right then, young lady, if you have a message for the boy Gretto, let’s hear it. Think of something that will let me get him outside without any trouble.”

“Huh?! Oh, um, y-yes, sir!”

Sylvie was flustered, and Elmer racked his brains, trying to think of some sort of advice to give her.

“Hmm. Could we take a cue from *Romeo and Juliet*...?”

“If we want to invite tragedy.”

“Well, we don’t know, you know? If we say the afterlife exists in the world of the play, then after they both die, they could meet again and laugh together. ‘Oh, Juliet, you weren’t really dead?!’ ‘Oh dear, Romeo, you silly fool!’”

Niki was at a loss as to how to respond to this extremely liberal interpretation, but then—

“WAAAAAAaaaaaaaaaah! MeeeeaaaAAAAAh!”

Hearing a catlike wail from upstairs, Niki looked up, startled.

“Excuse me. I need to step out for a bit,” she said simply, and then she was climbing the stairs with little emotion on her face.

After she’d watched her go, Sylvie turned to Begg.

“There’s a baby here?”

“Hmm? Yes. Still crying all the time, even at a year old. It’s the child of a relation of one of our alchemists, but both parents are dead, so raising this young mind falls to us. Not...unlike...Cz-Czes.”

Begg’s manner of speech had changed again, and Sylvie was briefly bewildered, but the weight of what she’d just been told actually calmed her heart.

“Is that right...? No parents...”

“But...you...see...that alchemist is a very impressive individual, so the child’s bound for a good life. Niki acts unfriendly, but she’s kind to the baby. She’s well suited to the work.”

Then, as if he had remembered something, Begg looked toward the front door.

“Oh, yes, that’s right. Speaking of being good with children, our little family head and that softhearted alchemist ought to be returning soon...”

While Sylvie and Begg were talking—Elmer, the very person who’d brought her here, had stopped listening to their conversation and had silently followed Niki up the stairs.



The Meyer residence Second floor

“Is that your baby, Niki?”

“That’s not even funny.”

Niki sounded disillusioned.

In her arms was the infant, who had finally managed to stop crying. At one year old, the child's infancy would be over soon, and Niki's petite arms made it appear especially large.

"I told you before, remember? This is the child of a relative of an alchemist who works here. Without any parents, the responsibility of raising it falls to us," Niki replied.

Elmer nodded easily. "I know."

Elmer had genuinely forgotten Begg's name, so Niki had assumed he might have forgotten this, too. She narrowed her eyes.

"Did you actually mean that as a joke?"

"I thought it was funny..." Elmer was wearing a bashful smile for some reason, and Niki gave a big sigh.

"You really don't change a bit. You try to make people smile, and yet you don't understand a woman's heart at all."

"You think so? If you're the one saying it, though, maybe you're right." Elmer went on, waving a hand in front of the baby, who'd stopped crying. "You've changed, Niki."

"Have I?"

"Yes. You're much more cheerful than you were five years ago. You were a little gloomy after what happened with Monica, but it seems like you've cheered up again recently."

Monica.

The moment that name came up, Niki's expression clouded slightly. She had owed a great debt to Monica and her friends, and Niki had been her friend, too.

The news that she'd died in an accident a year ago had given Niki a significant shock. As one who was looking for a place to die, Niki had never even dreamed that one of the people who'd given her the

hope to keep on living would die before she did. Monica's death had tormented Niki all the more for that reason, in many ways, and one of the things that had healed the wound was the baby she was caring for now.

She didn't reproach Elmer for mentioning her friend's death so bluntly. Instead, she slowly laid the drowsy baby in her arms into the crib.

After making sure she heard the peaceful, rhythmic breathing of sleep, she turned back to Elmer. "I see you still have no trouble saying the things most people don't want to talk about."

"I'm sorry if I upset you."

"I'm all right. Besides, I think staying sad forever would be doing Monica a disservice."

For one, Elmer had spent far more time with Monica than Niki had. If anyone else had casually brought up the dead, she might have found it unpleasant, but Elmer didn't make her feel that way.

Still, she knew what his personality was like, so in her case, it might have been more accurate to say that she'd given up on him, among other things.

"...You still haven't been able to get in touch with Huey?"

"Sure haven't. I do think he's alive, though." Elmer didn't seem concerned about his missing friend.

When she heard that, Niki lowered her eyes for just a moment. "I see..."

"He's looking ahead, you see. He might be able to smile pretty soon."

"I doubt he'll recover easily. I think he and Monica really loved each other. They were friends with you and me, but they became a part of each other."

“Hmm. I don’t know anything about romance.”

Elmer shrugged with disappointment. Then he asked Niki a question, smiling like a mischievous little boy.

“Is that what it was? Is that what’s made you more cheerful?”

“What do you mean?”

“R-o-m-a-n-c-e.” Elmer leaned against the window and went on, speaking like the young man he was. “Now that you’re able to talk about other people’s loves, I wondered whether it meant you’d found someone you liked, too.”

“You are incredible, Elmer, joking around like that when we’re talking about Monica and Huey.”

“You think so?”

“Even when Monica died, I bet you told Huey ‘Go on and smile’ without any trouble,” Niki murmured coldly.

“I did. I don’t think he heard me, though.”

“If he had, he would have hit you. He might even have stabbed you.”

“I think so, too.” A little sadness crept into his smile, but Elmer didn’t deny what he’d done. “Still, if it made him feel better and smile, I’d let him punch me or stab me as much as he wanted.”

“I’ll tell you now, no one would be able to smile doing that.”

“Are you sure?” Elmer argued, as casually as if this was just a bit of gossip. “My mother and father used to stab me and burn me, and they smiled when they did it, you know.”

“.....”

I...think he just confessed something outrageous to me.

...Was he abused?

Niki was silent, and Elmer went on.

“And not only my parents. Whenever I was in pain or screamed, the people around us all seemed really happy, and they praised me. So I didn’t even question it. According to the soldiers who massacred my mom and the rest of them, it was actually an evil thing.”

A chill ran through Niki, and perhaps sensing it, the child began to whimper, eyes still closed.

“I don’t know if Huey’s the same type of person as the people who raised me, but it’s not beyond the realm of possibility, is it?”

“...You probably shouldn’t share this with most people. With me, it’s all right, but still.”

Niki was uncomfortable, but the news hadn’t shocked her too deeply, and it hadn’t changed the way she thought of Elmer.

They’d met frequently over the last two years, but they’d hardly spoken about their respective pasts at all. Still, Niki had always sensed that Elmer’s life was peculiar in a way that was different from her own.

She’d never dreamed he’d tell her those things so easily at a time like this, and he had caught her off guard.

Perhaps reading her reaction, Elmer kept talking to her while he pulled funny faces and tried to make the whimpering child smile.

“I know. Since it’s you, I thought you might smile and forgive me if I told you. You didn’t smile for me, though.”

“I can’t smile about that.”

“That’s too bad. Well, back to the main subject: What about it? Is there somebody you like?”

He was asking out of sheer curiosity, and Niki smiled faintly. Even before Elmer could tell whether the smile was fake or genuine, Niki softly asked, “What would you do if I said it was you?”

“Is it?”

“Unfortunately, no,” she said teasingly, then went on, unabashed. “I have nothing against you, Elmer, and I do feel I’m in your debt. But I could never have romantic feelings for you.”

“Ha-ha! You wound me. With me, it’s all right, but you mustn’t tease other boys that way, you know? They’ll call you a siren who toys with men’s hearts.”

Elmer didn’t sound wounded in the slightest, and Niki’s response might have been retaliation for earlier.

“It’s all right. I’d only ever say things like that to you. I am sorry, though.”

“Don’t you worry. In fact, I’m glad you weren’t serious. I think someone like me probably shouldn’t get married.”

Niki understood what he meant.

Even if Elmer did get married—if a stranger he’d never even seen before cried in front of him, in that moment, that stranger would matter more to Elmer than his own wife. On the surface, he might appear to have a strong sense of justice. *But in Elmer’s case, if he needed to sacrifice his wife, his children, or even himself in order to make someone else smile, he would do it without a second thought.*

As far as he was concerned, individuals were not the priority, but the smiles of which only humans were capable.

Precisely because Niki knew about Elmer’s character, she’d understood his self-deprecating remark.

“...That’s probably true,” she replied with some disillusionment in her voice.

There was no need to say anything.

There was no need to feel anything.

After all, Elmer hadn't changed a bit since their first meeting.

If a woman who wanted to wed him existed, she would have to be a fanatic who could completely agree with the way he thought, an eccentric who liked sacrificing herself—or someone who had given up on everything. From a different angle, one could say that if she was constantly drowning in self-pity and despair, Elmer might spend his entire life trying to make her smile. But that relationship wouldn't benefit either of them; it would only keep them bound together.

Niki thought past that point.

Five years ago, she wouldn't have minded spending her life with Elmer.

If she was only living to find a place to die, then she could have done the same as him, offering herself over and over for the sake of strangers. Even sacrificing others. She might not have minded a love like that, the sort that transcended good and evil.

But she was different now. She was definitely not who she'd been back then.

As Elmer had said, she'd changed.

While she'd been looking for a place to die—she had found a man she'd like to join her in the search.

As it turned out, that man hadn't been Elmer.

That was all it was.

"So who is this person you've fallen for, Niki? If there's anything I can do to help you, I'll do it."

"It's a secret."

Niki smiled faintly. Elmer looked at her and knew her smile wasn't faked.

The ability to tell fake smiles from genuine ones was a skill unique to him, a product of his long years of obsessing over the expression.

Ultimately, Niki didn't seem inclined to continue that conversation, but it didn't bother Elmer.

After all, to him, the important thing wasn't who she was in love with, but her smile itself.

"I see... I won't ask anymore, then. Look at this: bleh-bleh-brrrrrrrrrrrr!"

Elmer's interest promptly shifted to the mewling baby, and he started to make funny faces, trying to coax out a smile. But the baby only seemed bewildered by this strange adult leaning in too close and remained just as querulous as before.

Just then—

"We're home!"

—a cheerful voice echoed up from the first floor, catching the baby's attention. The whimpering stopped; apparently, this sound was a familiar, reassuring one.

The voice was a child's, too high to tell immediately whether it belonged to a boy or a girl.

"It sounds like the head of our family has returned." Niki gave a faint smile.

When Elmer saw her expression, a vague thought crossed his mind.

What's this? That's the happiest smile she's shown so far. The person Niki likes can't possibly be...

He'd wondered whether the owner of that voice might be the secret answer, but a question immediately came to mind.

...But from what I heard, the head of the family is still only about ten, isn't he? Does Niki go for younger men?

While he was busy speculating, he heard voices in conversation downstairs.

Begg seemed to be explaining about Sylvie in his usual rapid manner.

When she heard the voices, Niki gently took the infant from the baby bed and slowly started downstairs.

As Elmer followed her, two figures that hadn't been on the first floor earlier came into view.

One of them was unmistakably a child, so that was probably Czeslaw, the head of the house.

Then, when he looked between Niki and the other man's face, he was sure of it.

Oh, that's him. That's the one Niki likes.

"Welcome back," Niki said to Czes and the man.

Then, in the moment her gaze shifted from Czes to the tall man—she felt relieved.

"It's good to be home. It sounds as if there was an explosion at the port. Did you hear it here as well?"

"What? Come to think of it, there was a noise a little while ago... Are you both all right?"

"Yes, we were over in the library district."

"I see. Thank goodness...", she murmured, the relief in her face deepening.

Her smile hadn't grown more intense; her cheeks hadn't flushed with embarrassment. It was a slight emotional shift, the sort only a smile junkie like Elmer could have made out.

Her smile was real, a signal that the fire known as peace of mind had been lit in her heart.

As he looked at that expression, Elmer felt relieved as well.

She was definitely in love. That was what had given her such a smile, even as she kept searching for a place to die.

Elmer C. Albatross did not feel envy or loss upon learning a woman of his acquaintance had fallen in love.

He felt genuine gratitude.

The man's mere existence had made Niki fall in love with him and smile.

Elmer was grateful to him.

To him, this was a perfectly normal thing. Conversely, no other thought occurred to him, not even in passing.



He took another look at the young man who was the object of Niki's affections—and then, just for a moment, he felt bewildered.

Huh? What is it? This feeling is so odd...

The man was smiling at Niki as she welcomed him home.

It wasn't a fake smile; Elmer was sure it was genuine.

Even so, he couldn't rid himself of the sensation that something wasn't quite right.

Oh, I see.

As he realized what lay behind the strange feeling, Elmer was relieved.

Oh. Is that all? It just reminded me of them...

Earlier, he'd told Niki about the smiles his father and mother and the people around them had worn.

The young man Niki was talking to wore a smile that was exactly like theirs.

That was all it was.

Ah yes, anyone raising a child would smile that way.

I see. So he must see Niki as a little sister or a child, then.

Thinking to himself, Elmer slowly reached the bottom of the stairs.

The young man slowly turned from Niki to Elmer, and his smile acquired a slightly different cast.

"Well, well... I don't believe we've spoken like this before."

"Hmm? Have we met?" Elmer was puzzled.

"I've seen you speaking with Maiza from time to time," the young man explained. "You're a student of Maestro Dalton's, aren't you?"

“Well, Maestro Dalton hardly teaches me anything, but yes. Oh, I’m Elmer. Elmer C. Albatross.”

“Ah, my apologies. I hadn’t introduced myself yet.”

The young man’s hair was long enough in front to hide his eyes completely, but as he quietly said his name, there was a breezy smile on his lips.

It wasn’t a fake smile. *It was the smile of someone who was enjoying life so much he could hardly contain himself.*

“Lebreau Fermet Viralesque. Call me what you wish.”



Evening The church

There was only one church in Lotto Valentino.

It had been built outside of town and without much care. Almost no one came to worship; the building was more of a facility used to dispose of corpses when someone died. This was an extremely irreverent way to treat a church, but the town had practically been built for the alchemists, and it was said that this had been a maneuver to weaken the influence of the church there. The result was rumors that some alchemists might be dabbling in summoning demons, which was one of the things that had widened the rift between the town and its neighbors.

But even among the people of this town, there was someone who piously mourned the dead.

The man who’d come to pray quietly raised his head.

The church was very old, and its interior wasn’t fully furnished. But the one who had been offering prayers was not nearly so desolate in his appearance.

In terms of age, he was somewhere between his late twenties and thirty. He wore an *habit à la française*—formal wear modeled after the French style—made from thin cloth. Although his coat was a color suited to worship, it had an unconventional flair that seemed more fantastical than not.

The quality of his clothes made it obvious he was a nobleman, though not necessarily a respectable one. Unusually for a man of his status, he wasn't wearing a peruke—a noble's wig—nor had he applied the cloth moles known as *mouches* that were fashionable among the European nobility. Instead, he wore a particularly dramatic tricorn hat pulled down low on his head. There were dark circles under his eyes, although it wasn't clear whether he had painted them on or wasn't getting enough sleep. Below them, he'd drawn small stars with cosmetic ink in lieu of beauty spots.

From his appearance alone, someone could easily have imagined that he was a clown who'd run away from a theater and was taking refuge in a church.

But no matter how eccentric his dress was, no one in this town would rebuke him for it.

Esperanza Boroñal was the young count who governed Lotto Valentino as his territory.

His unique appearance occasionally earned the Clown Count some jeers, but he was definitely the most powerful person in town.

Although, due to the interference of House Dormентаire, his status was weakening.

It was rare for him to come to church alone, without attendants. His carriage was stopped a short distance away, but even its driver didn't know what business the lord had here.

Without telling anyone the reason for his prayers, Esperanza left the church behind him.

He would have preferred to stay longer, but that wasn't an option under the current circumstances.

Apparently, there had been an accidental explosion at the port a short while earlier, and one of the inns the House of Dormентаire was using as a base had blown up.

Fortunately, no one seemed to have been hurt, but one false step and it could have been a huge tragedy.

In order to identify the cause, he'd have to light a fire under the town police.

Esperanza resumed his lordly bearing, and as he stepped into the light of the western sun over the church's courtyard, he realized a young man was standing there alone.

"....."

Silently, Esperanza evaluated the figure.

His dress suggested he wasn't affiliated with the church. The clothes were fine enough for nobility, but he didn't carry himself like any of the local aristocrats.

Slowly, the young man crossed the embellished stones that paved the courtyard, approaching Esperanza. He was smiling gently.

Esperanza squinted, trying to identify the person walking through the sunlight.

He was around twenty years old—about the same age as Elmer, who was a guest at the Boroñal residence.

He didn't appear to be only passing through, either, but Esperanza couldn't sense any hostility or malice from him. If he was an assassin, then he was good enough to present himself as perfectly nonthreatening, and Esperanza couldn't think of a reason why anyone would send someone so skilled to take his life. As he was mulling over these questions, the man slowly came up to him.

“Are you mourning your family?” he asked.

“...I am.” Esperanza had absolutely no interest in anything except women, so he responded curtly to the man.

“*She* meant a great deal to you, didn’t she?”

“...Who are you?” Esperanza took another look at the young man’s face.

He’d only acknowledged that he was mourning his family, and yet the youth had asked about *her*. And he was correct to do so.

The lord took just a little interest in him—and that was when he remembered.

A young man with glossy black hair and golden eyes—Elmer had told him about someone like that once.

As he remembered the name he’d been told, a complicated emotion welled up inside him. Before the young man could say anything more, Esperanza murmured a question of his own. “...Huey. Are you Huey Laforet?”

“Well, well. To think the lord would know my name. I’m honored, Your Excellency.” The young man bowed courteously.

The moment he knew he was dealing with Huey Laforet, the lord’s face went blank. He looked down for the space of a few breaths, then slowly raised his eyes again. “I see,” he said briefly.

“...Is that all?”

“What else would there be?”

“I’d assumed you would curse at me, strike me...perhaps even shoot me.” The young man smiled thinly.

Esperanza nearly considered the latter option, but he knew he didn’t feel strongly enough to do so. He quietly shook his head.

“A year ago, I might have. I shall tell you now, Elmer has told me that none of it was your fault. On the contrary, I did nothing. I am the one who deserves to be reviled or struck.”

One year ago...

His younger sister, Maribel Boroñal, had died—as Monica Campanella, the heinous criminal who had killed Esperanza’s parents and a nobleman from the House of Dormентаire.

Due to a complicated set of circumstances, Maribel Boroñal had already been declared dead. In exchange, she’d lived on here in Lotto Valentino, wearing the mask of Monica.

Until a visit from House Dormентаire had shattered her mask.

More accurately, it had forcibly plastered the shattered mask onto Maribel’s face and ultimately compelled her to end her life as the criminal Monica Campanella.

According to the report issued by the House of Dormентаire, she had died accidentally in custody. Immediately before the accident, a fire had broken out, and it was possible that the Mask Makers had killed her.

However, Esperanza hadn’t believed a word of it. He knew his sister was dead; while her body had never surfaced, in light of the circumstances Elmer had told him about later, it would have been difficult to imagine that she was alive.

What he hadn’t believed was that she’d been killed by the Mask Makers.

After all, Esperanza knew.

Over her mask as Monica, the apprentice alchemist, Maribel had worn yet another: that of the Mask Maker.

He also knew that others had worn that mask along with her.

Huey Laforet was an alchemist who had been deeply in love with Esperanza's sister, and he had shared her identity as the Mask Maker. For the year following her death, he had been missing.

Esperanza spoke to him impassively. "Even though I know you aren't responsible at all, a year ago, I would have taken you to task. I might have taken advantage of my authority as lord and forced you to bear all the blame. Although, had you been a woman, no doubt it would have been another story." He gave a small sigh. "However, time is cruel. My unjust resentment toward you and the House of Dormентаire is gradually fading, along with my hatred of my own powerlessness. Only the sorrow and regret remain unhealed."

This wasn't the way a lord of the town might be expected to speak to a mere alchemist, but for a noble, Esperanza was rather eccentric. He considered all women to be above him and behaved accordingly, and he'd never been the type to care about rank.

Meanwhile, Huey was technically a commoner, but he spoke without any concern for the other man's station himself. "If time doesn't heal them, they may not be wounds," the young man said with a trace of irony. He gave a little shrug. "Although I suspect Elmer would say a smile would heal them easily."

"You're not wrong there." Imagining Elmer's face, Esperanza smiled wryly. "Today is the first anniversary of Monica's death, and yet he seems to have gone off to disport himself with a lady who was due to start working today. He didn't put in an appearance on All Souls' Day, either. I doubt he's actually forgotten about her, but..."

"The new girl was probably having trouble smiling."

"Yes, no doubt it was something like that. If I saw a woman looking sad, I would do the same thing myself."

Unaware that the cause of Sylvie's anxiety lay partly with himself, Esperanza took another look at Huey.

Still smiling, Huey averted his eyes. “The dead...may not interest him,” he said quietly, reminiscing. “He’s always been that way.”

“And what about you?” the lord asked.

“Me?”

“I won’t ask why you disappeared. However, I assume you didn’t come here to listen to me whining.” Esperanza remained thoroughly impassive.

He did want to talk about Monica more, and to hear what Huey had to say, but—

Huey’s smile nagged at him, and he wanted to confirm the man’s intentions. Not even the most generous interpretation of his behavior suggested he had come here to mourn the death of someone he’d loved dearly.

“I apologize for responding to your question with a question, but...” Huey turned to face the church’s main gate, gazing out over the distant town and the sea. “*Where do you think Monica is?*”

“...? What do you mean?”

“I don’t hold any vain hopes that she is actually alive. If that were the case, I wouldn’t have come back here. I’d be where she was.”

The young man’s expression wasn’t the least bit disturbed—just the same faint smile he’d had during this whole conversation.

“If you believe we have souls, then did hers reach the kingdom of God? Or is it suffering in purgatory for her sins?” Huey didn’t look at Esperanza; his eyes were fixed on the faraway town. “She had two faces—one as a criminal, and one as Maribel, who was innocent at her death. Has that left her wandering through the night, unable to reach either God’s kingdom or purgatory?”

“...Enough of this. I’m not in the mood for this sort of talk.”

Esperanza quietly tried to interrupt, but Huey went on anyway.

“No churchyard has enough space to bury bodies now. They say one church kept moving the bones it dug up into its cellar, until the corridor was filled with skulls. Still, the dead that must be laid to rest physically exist.”

“.....”

“But Monica’s body never surfaced, and she isn’t here, either. She’s nowhere—neither her body nor her soul. No one can confirm whether she’s dead or alive. She’s trapped in a place that’s *no place at all*.”

Huey paused, and once Esperanza was certain he had finished, he sighed heavily and slowly spoke to Huey’s back.

“Are you trying to make me angry? Or is this an attempt to comfort yourself by making light of Monica’s death with cheap poetry? If it’s the former, that’s unfortunate. While I do find it unpleasant, I don’t have the spirit to be angry anymore.”

Huey shook his head slightly. “It’s neither. I apologize for making you uncomfortable; I simply thought I should tell you, at least.”

“Tell me what?”

“About what I’m going to do in this town.”

“?”

The lord didn’t appear to understand what he was saying. Huey was still wearing that same faint, cold smile.

“When Monica...went into the ocean, her breast bright with blood...right before she fell, she said something to me.”

He paused for a breath, then closed his eyes softly. “...‘Let’s meet again,’ she said. To a man like me.”

As Esperanza listened to him, he felt cold sweat breaking out on his back.

Something is wrong. This is not the same man Elmer told me about.

Is this really Huey Laforet?

If so, then does this mean he's changed?

One year—one could say it was either too brief to change a person, or long enough.

Where on earth had he vanished to during that time? What had he seen?

As questions rose in Esperanza's mind, Huey slowly turned around—and told him.

"I've decided to look for her. For Monica."

"...What...are you talking about?"

"She may not approve of what I'm about to do, so I wanted to tell you in advance. After all, you know her past more deeply than anyone."

That was when Esperanza realized that Huey had something in his right hand. He was glancing at it from time to time as he gazed out at the town.

It was a pocket watch, he realized, one that was quite a bit smaller than the sort Esperanza was used to. So the young man was concerned about the time.

But why?

He almost asked that question aloud, but at present, he was more concerned about the rest of Huey's sentence.

While Esperanza was wondering what to make of all this, Huey slipped the watch into his breast pocket and turned back to him, then finally finished what he'd been saying before.

"No matter what happens from now on...it isn't Monica's fault."

“What...?”

“So you don’t need to trouble yourself about it, either.

“I’m just looking for Monica, on my own terms.”

In one moment, the townscape behind Huey changed.

“...?”

In *several places* between the town and the ocean, black smoke spread rapidly, and a few seconds later, explosions echoed across the courtyard, buzzing against his skin.

“Wha...?”

Hastily, Esperanza leaned out through the church’s main gate for a better view of what was happening below. Black smoke was rising into the sky from several locations, and the red light of flames flickered through it.

“Huey Laforet, what is the meaning of this...?!”

Flustered, Esperanza turned around, then fell silent.

Huey Laforet was no longer in the courtyard. All he saw were the figures of church personnel who’d come out to see what was going on.

However, Esperanza was certain. He didn’t understand what Huey meant by “looking for Monica,” but at the very least, he could imagine what he was planning to do in this town.

The House of Dormентаire had stolen his lover’s happiness and then her life, if only indirectly.

As the Mask Maker, or maybe just as a man, *he meant to take his revenge.*





Multiple explosions had occurred in town simultaneously.

Naturally, crowds of people had seen them happen.

One of the targets had been a Dormентаire transport ship lying at anchor in the port.

The ship's hold had exploded. No one had been inside, but several people on deck had sustained minor injuries. While the entire crew had escaped, half a month's worth of Dormентаire resources had been lost to the sea.

"Let me just say this: I care not how many of that lot's ships go up in flames."

"Don't say that. We just found out that even the Dormentaires have some decent people, remember?" Zank reproved Nile for his ruthless sentiments.

They were watching the burning wreckage from another ship that was anchored a short distance away.

Denkurou stood beside them and listened, frowning as he watched the black smoke from the blazing ship. "It appears that the earlier explosion truly was no accident." Gazing far out to sea, at the distant horizon, he murmured to himself, "...I suspect a storm is nigh."

He was visualizing a lone ship appearing over that horizon.

"I hope it does not affect the departure of the *Advena Avis*."



The Avaro residence

Gretto had been watching the smoke from a window in his room. He was trembling, eyes wide, and wondering what was going on. Before

long, he remembered Sylvie and looked toward the lord's mansion with worry.

Fortunately, no black smoke was rising from that direction, and he gave a small sigh of relief.

Sylvie was at the Meyer family's studio just then, but he didn't know that; he was simply reassured by the knowledge that the lord's mansion was safe.

"What in the world is going on...?" Gretto eyed the town uneasily.

However, at the same time, a quiet elation was welling up in his heart.

Could this be an omen of change? Had his chance finally come? The one he'd been waiting for all this time, the one that would let him and Sylvie be together...

As Gretto impressed the image of the town in flames upon his memory...

The merest trace of the courage to act was beginning to grow inside him.



Another of the explosion sites had been a Dormентаire provisions storehouse.

The first places to explode had stored guns and gunpowder as well, but no fire was ever used in this particular place, and an explosion had seemed unthinkable.

"What on earth happened?!"

As Carla raced to the scene, her first thought had been the serial arson incident the Mask Makers had been responsible for a year ago. It had been a year to the day since then; it seemed impossible not to suspect a connection.

“Were we attacked?!” she asked the private soldiers who’d been guarding the provisions storehouse. They’d sustained light burns, and they exchanged looks before responding.

“N-no... During the time we were on guard, no one tried to... And if the criminal had been inside, he’d have been burned to a crisp.”

After hearing several more reports, Carla frowned and fell to thinking. Once the fire had been put out, the burn marks indicated that the explosion had occurred in the center of the storehouse. There were no signs that anyone had thrown an explosive in through the window.

If the arsonist had taken advantage of the guards’ shift change, they might have been able to sneak in, but would they have stayed in hiding until then? No one had seen any figures fleeing the scene, either, and no charred corpses had been found.

Thinking would get her nowhere. Carla turned to the two alchemists she’d brought to the scene with her. “Szilard, Victor, what do you think? Is there any device that could create a substantial delay before the explosion?”

Victor thought for several seconds before he answered. “If you wanted a device that would create fire by itself after a delay, then you could make plenty... But I’m more concerned about the way all the explosions happened at once. There’s no way to detonate them all at the exact same time.”

Victor lapsed into thought again.

Meanwhile, Szilard walked around the scene in silence, prodding various places with his walking stick. Finding something under the blackened fragments of a shelf, he picked it up without much of a reaction.

“What’s the matter, old man? What did you find?” Victor’s eyes were shining with curiosity, and Szilard snorted at him.

“...I expect it’s part of a clock.”

“Huh?”

“The culprit did something rather intriguing. He must have designed a device with both clocks and gunpowder that would go off at a precise time in different locations,” he explained briefly.

Victor visualized several different mechanisms. “But wouldn’t that make for a rather big device?”

“We won’t know until we investigate the other sites, but they were probably small enough to be carried in during an unguarded moment. The fact that he created explosions this large with an object of that size is impressive.” Szilard seemed to be commending the criminal as he smiled thinly beneath his thick whiskers.

Watching him, Victor felt a bit of a chill run down his spine.

However, what he was afraid of wasn’t the smile, but the fact that Szilard—an individual who took great pleasure in tearing other people down—had admitted that he was impressed by the man who’d done this. A man who was their enemy.



To digress for a moment—

Many years later, when he thought back over this time, Victor would tell his men:

“If I remember right, the world’s first time bomb was made by an inventor named David something in the late 1770s. But the culprit in this incident combined a clock and explosives into a proper time bomb more than sixty years before that.

“Huey may have been an actual genius, goddamn him... Especially when it came to fire.”



Naturally, Victor wasn't able to deduce the criminal from the state of the scene back then. All he could do was shrug and offer a dryly humorous reply.

"...Bollocks. Who'd have thought *this* would happen on the day we got here? Ha, do you think we'll be suspects?" Victor laughed in a self-mocking way, while Szilard responded dully.

"A better interpretation would be that this is a warning from the Mask Makers to the foreign alchemists who've come to steal their techniques."

"...Then what happens if we ignore that warning?"

"The contents of our bags will be exchanged for articles that make exquisite use of clocks and gunpowder. That's all. This is a group that is capable of everything from counterfeiting gold to arson. They could very well do anything."

When he heard that, Victor spoke almost to himself. "I almost hope the ones responsible for this are a plain old evil organization." He remembered the trouble the Dormентаire private troops had created that afternoon and *tsked* quietly. "After all, we're the ones who appear to be the villains here."

"What are you saying?"

"Whoever set these bombs may believe they're acting in the name of justice."

Scratching the tip of his nose, he glanced at Carla and didn't mince words.

"Which means...I doubt some shallow attempt at persuasion will be enough to make them stop.

"To put it bluntly, *I doubt this is the last we'll see of them.*"

His guess was correct.

After that day, the flames of terror enveloped the town of Lotto Valentino.

In the space of a mere week, *thirty-six bombings occurred*.

In the end, the House of Dormентаire's private soldiers failed to catch so much as the culprit's shadow. The citizens had once accepted the distinguished family's control, but as they grew more and more afraid of the bomber, they began to distance themselves from the House of Dormентаire.

Meanwhile, the Dormентаire soldiers were watching the residents with near paranoia, and the friction between them grew even greater.

As if he was sneering at that situation, the criminal continued to destroy the town.

Slowly. And steadily.

As if he was declaring that Lotto Valentino itself was his enemy.

Interlude—Victor Talbot's Report (Excerpt) II

Hey, how've you been?

It's already been ten days or so since I started sending you these letters. Has anything changed where you are? It's nothing but changes here.

Oh, but I myself haven't changed. I'm still the man you were kind enough to love; I always have been. And I'm still a man who loves you. Even if I'm only one of a hundred.

That aside...what's changed is the situation in town.

I've told you the people in Lotto Valentino are all bastards.

That reminds me, I went to the patisserie I mentioned before, and the proprietor really was nothing like the rest of the town. She said a lodger she'd loved like her own daughter had died. Took years off her life. But if she's still so strong at her age, you have to wonder just how tough she was to begin with.

Sorry. I'm digressing again.

Anyway, we know most of Lotto Valentino are bastards, but I've learned quite a few of the Dormентаire private troops are bastards, too.

Can't you hire some better soldiers? Have mercy on poor Carla. There's only one of her, you know. She doesn't have time to whip the newcomers into shape.

Carla's not a bad apple, but...the town is saturated with complaints against the House of Dormентаire.

At first, there were swarms of opportunists trying to get in the House of Dormентаire's good graces for their own gain, but then the bombings started. Now there's a whole slew of people who suddenly refuse to fly the Dormентаire banner anymore.

To make matters worse, our soldiers say the culprit has to be in town, and I hear they're conducting some very rough "searches." What I'm saying is, there's more trouble brewing around here than usual.

I've wondered if this was the criminals' goal all along, trying to create a rift between the townsfolk and the House of Dormентаire.

I also heard rumors that the Mask Makers were back.

The song the urchins are singing in the alleys is a real masterpiece.

The devil's coming, lantern lit.

The devil's coming, mask in place.

Here to put a mask on you,

Here with masks for every face.

If a song like that is gaining popularity, you know public order is wearing thin.

I think the Mask Maker members who were lying low in town heard that song, or rumor, or what have you, and took it as inspiration... Not only do we have those clock bombs, now we've got regular arson incidents happening, too.

And just as it says in the children's song...people are saying they want to join them, and asking how they can get a mask.

They probably assume that if the Mask Makers are behind the crimes, then joining up will keep them safe.

As a matter of fact, I hear there were several hundred members when the town was on fire last year. They send shivers down your spine, those Mask Makers.

Still...what I find truly sinister are the ones with the bombs. Although, it's only my assumption there's more than one.

At first, I actually thought it might be some sort of resistance movement intended to rouse the locals. Over the past few days, though, I've changed my mind.

I think the criminals may be planning to crush the townspeople and the House of Dormентаire both.

Over the past three days or so, the damage has started spreading to aristocratic mansions and the libraries, even though those hadn't been targeted before.

I tell you, the momentum of this is enough to make you think they might hate Lotto Valentino itself.

The situation is getting dire. If this keeps up and the damage starts to spread beyond the town, even the viceroy of Naples won't stay quiet. I wouldn't be surprised if the whole town got wiped off the map.

(Omitted)

Come to think of it, I wrote quite a bit about how the town seemed to be teetering on the edge a little while ago. It seems the local alchemists think so, too. I've seen several headed out of town on wagons loaded up with research materials.

But our spy intends to stay in town.

I said, "Your job here is done; you could just run for it," but...from what I hear, a ship's going to be arriving in port soon. A midsize ship the alchemists of Lotto Valentino bought together.

Of course, a few regular old alchemists still wouldn't have enough to buy a whole ship. Apparently an aristocrat from some other country offered some of the funding. The ship itself is incredible.

According to [], there's a group that's planning to board it and sail to the New World.

The New World. Has a nice ring to it, doesn't it? It's America. America! If I get the chance, I'd like to board that boat, too.

Oh, did I scare you? Don't worry, I won't leave for America on my own.

Naturally, the local alchemists are suspected of being the culprits this time around.

If I find out anything in connection with that, we'll have a windfall on our hands, so I'm thinking I'll check into that ship.

...So if you find out anything, write back and tell me. Please.

The ship's name is the Advena Avis.

If I learn something new, I'll write it in my next report.

Yours alone,

Victor Talbot



CHAPTER 3

THE SMILES OF THOSE IN LOVE

CHAPTER 3: THE SMILES OF THOSE IN LOVE

Niki had been searching for a place to die.

She didn't have a family name; she was just Niki. It sounded like a kitten's name. She wasn't terribly attached to it. She didn't think names were all that important to begin with.

That being the case, she felt she didn't need a grave after she died. Even if someone put a headstone up for her, she didn't care to have anything written on it. Her name wasn't the only thing that didn't matter to her—she had no interest in what happened after she died. It was safe to say that the only reason she was living was to find a place where she could die feeling satisfied.

If she died the moment she found it, she'd have no regrets. In fact, she felt a constant guilt over the fact that she was alive.

Many of the other enslaved children with her had died, while she had been lucky enough to survive.

The sensation that she alone was enjoying good fortune remained firmly in her heart, like a wedge. If she hadn't met Elmer and his friends, that wedge would have shattered her long ago, rapidly driving her toward death.

She owed a great debt to Elmer, and it was safe to say he'd dramatically changed her life.

But although Elmer was the one who'd given her a reason to live—the one who'd given Niki hope was not Elmer or the Mask Makers, but someone else.

You're looking for a place to die? That isn't something you seek out. You arrive there naturally, after you've lived out your life. I imagine

whether you are able to smile then or not depends on the nature of that life.

Niki would have wandered aimlessly if a young alchemist hadn't said those words to her and kept her at the Meyer family studio. He had simply shown kindness to her, a failure of a slave and a total stranger.

She had been employed to take care of Czes, and he treated her just as he treated his other companions.

Lebreau Fermet Viralesque.

At first, Niki had thought his name was overly fanciful. However, as they worked in the Meyer household together, she realized it suited him: He was a truly clever, fulfilled human being.

As an alchemist, he managed the studio. Apparently, he was well acquainted with nearly all the research that was conducted there, and he was effectively the person in charge.

At the same time, he had a thorough knowledge of economics and culture, a fact which had remained unchanged after his arrival in Lotto Valentino, and with his sociable personality, he brought a sense of fresh air into the Meyer household.

He also spread the studio's technologies among the nobles and merchants, serving as the studio's central pillar in place of the family's young head. He was a genius, a man who could do anything, and friendly besides.

Not only that, but he was kind even to people who were only passing through, like her.

Why did he treat her no differently from anyone else, when her background was a mystery? When Niki had asked him about it directly, Fermet had given her a troubled smile.

I'm just clumsy, that's all. I'm not so clever with people that I can adjust my responses to match the ranks or pasts of others. I like what I like, and I hate what I hate. That's the only decision I can make.

As Niki watched that young man over several years, she realized what he'd said was probably true. He probably did love the world. He was her polar opposite.

It was actually strange that they existed in such close proximity.

The thought reminded her of Elmer—but Elmer had only cared for smiles. Unlike him, this man accepted the world as it was, good and evil together; he was a different breed.

And—that was around the time she realized it.

Every time the young man called her Niki, it soothed her heart, just a little.

And for the first time, she began to be very conscious of names.

The people of Lotto Valentino had bought her as a slave and called her Niki. To her, it had only been a symbol used to tell her apart from other people.

Meeting the Mask Makers and Elmer's group had added a slightly different nuance to it, but she hadn't been able to identify it, nor had she tried to.

However, over several years, as Fermet, Czes, Begg, and the others in the studio called her name, Niki had come to like hearing it. She began to think about why that was, and finally, she found the answer.

When they called her name, it reminded her that she was a necessary part of the studio's community. That feeling made her terribly happy.

Such a thing would have been unthinkable while she was forced to work as a slave in Lotto Valentino. Back then, she would have preferred to be unneeded and neglected, to never hear her name.

After that realization, Niki could truly feel that the world around her had changed.

She'd intended to keep those feelings inside herself, but one day, she confessed them to Fermet. Maybe it was a peculiarity of his sociable personality, but he had a natural ability to draw words out of people.

After she'd told him, she apologized. *...I'm sorry. I'm sure I've bored you.*

Fermet had shaken his head slightly, smiling gently. *It wasn't boring at all. Niki, you're already like family to us. As a matter of fact, I'm glad to hear it—that you've accepted that we need you, and that you're happy about it, I mean.*

To Niki, who was looking for a place to die, Fermet's words were intoxicating.

When you call someone's name, whether it's with goodwill or malice, you tether their awareness. And when we called your name, that tether didn't constrict your world. Since that's so, please call us by our names as well. I believe the tether will change to a connection that will have a good influence on both of us.

Slowly yet steadily, a sense of sheer bliss stole across her heart, different from the euphoria of the drug she'd made.

From then on, every time she said Fermet's name, she felt a sort of bashful, ticklish sensation.

When people called her name, she would gain tethers and connections—ever since Fermet had introduced her to the idea, she'd grown oddly conscious of it.

However, she didn't feel bashful with Czes or Begg. It was an emotion she felt only toward Fermet.

The moment she realized this—Niki was overcome by another, odder ticklishness. She knew what the sensation was, really, but she pretended she didn't. She hadn't yet completely shaken free of her past, and there was a little thorn of guilt in her heart. She wasn't sure someone like her had the right to feel such an emotion.

As she wondered what to do with the feeling, one day, she heard that the Meyer family was moving its studio to Lotto Valentino.

Will it remind you of the past? Fermet had asked, knowing Niki's history.

She'd smiled wryly. I don't think I'll care about it now, but I can't forgive them for it. I can't be a good person like you, Fermet.

But Fermet had told her, with utter sincerity, *I'm not a good person. Nothing of the sort.*

Slowly, he began to tell her about his other face. How he was a spy for House Dormентаire, one of the studio's financial supporters, and that he sent them reports on the alchemists of Lotto Valentino and the trends in the town.

However, when Niki heard that—she was happy.

Ordinarily, it would have been more beneficial for him to hide that information; he'd had no need to tell Niki.

And yet he had gone out of his way to confess it to her, and that made her happier than anything.

I'll help you, she had told him soon before they moved.

Fermet had warned her that it was dirty work, work she shouldn't do, but Niki insisted. *It's no trouble. My younger self would laugh at you for calling a job like that dirty.*

Although, she might not have been capable of laughing.

Murmuring self-deprecatingly to herself, Niki stood her ground and tried again, over and over.

She knew more about the town's underbelly than Fermet did, and the people felt guilty enough toward her that they wouldn't actively involve themselves with her.

Even so, Fermet had continued to express concern for her, worrying they might "shadow you out of misplaced resentment," but—

Ultimately, he'd given in, and she'd helped him by serving as a courier to the House of Dormентаire, a public job that was a far cry from spying.

Whenever she completed a job as a courier, Fermet was grateful to her.

Thank you, Niki.

Every time she heard those words, her old wounds healed, little by little.

In the small community of the Meyer studio, she and Fermet shared an additional, exclusive relationship as spies for the Dormentaires.

Each time Fermet called her name, Niki could feel that private connection.

When about half a year had passed since they'd formed that relationship, a vague thought had crossed her mind. It was not a shock like a bolt of lightning or a carefully considered conclusion.

For no particular reason, she simply stopped pretending she didn't know.

It wasn't that the guilt had faded. However, she understood that *this and that might be two different matters.*

She accepted the small feeling that welled up from deep inside her.

That was all it was.



And so time passed—



The Boroñal mansion

It had been a little over ten days since she'd been dismissed by the House of Avaro and sold to the lord.

To Sylvie Lumiere, those ten days had been time enough to change what she valued in life.

The trigger had been her exile from the Avaro residence and separation from Gretto, of course. She had been afraid that this was the beginning of a life of despair and agony, but her situation had not played out as she anticipated.

A mysterious young man had taken her out of the lord's mansion and put her in contact with the alchemists of the Meyer clan, and then several unexpected developments had occurred. It seemed as if the world was crumbling around her.

The bombings and arson incidents were still ongoing.

At first, the attacks had only been the bombings, but over the past few days, a variety of arson methods had been used, from shooting flaming arrows onto roofs to setting fires directly. The range of targets was gradually broadening as well.

The first places to burn had been facilities and buildings with close ties to the House of Dormентаire, as well as Dormентаire ships. Now, ten days later, it was safe to call the attacks indiscriminate.

Over the past three days, the town's countless libraries, its aristocratic mansions, and even a ship with no connection to the House of Dormентаire, had been burned.

That last target had been particularly problematic, and the town was in an uproar over the prospect of foreign interference.

Sylvie wasn't especially happy that the people around her were in more of a predicament than she was, but their situations did appear to be inversely proportionate; as the town was backed into a corner, Sylvie felt her own world begin to widen.

Is this actually real?

Whenever she woke up, every time, she had to make sure everything that had happened up till the previous day had been reality. That was how novel these ten days had been for her. A new world was opening up before her.

To a bystander, these were no more than events in the same town, and this might have seemed like an exaggeration—but up until now, she'd been like a frog in a covered well, unable to see the sky.

In that case, had emerging from her well and learning of a new world diluted her memories with Gretto? No, she only longed to see him more.

If the recent destruction outside had widened her world, then Gretto had climbed into her world—that narrow well—and had shown her a new world inside it.

Whenever she heard that an aristocrat's mansion had been burned, she was beside herself with worry that it might have been the Avaro residence.

But every time flames went up, it was always from mansions at a distance from the Avaros', and she felt deep relief when she heard there were currently no injuries among the aristocrats or their servants.

As long as she knew Gretto was safe, all she had to do was watch for a chance and contact him.

Begg Garrott, the alchemist employed by the House of Avaro, was supposed to make the arrangements for it, but he hadn't been

summoned to the Avaro mansion yet. All she could do was watch Lotto Valentino slowly turn to rubble as she waited.

When it came to waiting, she wasn't as optimistic as Gretto. He believed something would change in time, but Sylvie's nature made her worry those changes might be for the worst.

At the very least, however, her fear of the lord's lechery had been summarily dispelled ten days previously.

The lord in question, Esperanza Boroñal, still ate his meals at the same table as Sylvie and the other female servants, but he didn't watch them with the eyes of a carnivore watching its prey.

If she'd had to say, he behaved more like a cat sprawled out comfortably, basking in the sunlight of the presence of women. The tranquility of this clownishly dressed nobleman had been the most unexpected thing Sylvie had encountered in the past ten days.

The Boroñal mansion was slightly more old-fashioned than the Avaros', yet it was more sumptuous than any of the town's other aristocratic mansions. Inside, many rooms were linked to one another in straight lines, which made for a disorienting view if you looked through all the doors from one end of the long hallways.

The great dining room was particularly spacious. As Sylvie sat down at the enormous table, she took another look around her. All sorts of dishes were arrayed in front of her, and the servants and the lord ate the same dinner together.

I really was thinking something awfully rude, wasn't I?

From the rumors, she'd imagined Esperanza was the type of man who terrorized women and treated them as objects. When Elmer had introduced her to him, she hadn't been able to hide her confusion.

As a matter of fact, his female-supremacist doctrine was abnormally extreme, but for that reason, he never did anything a woman might object to, and he treated even a new servant like Sylvie with the utmost courtesy.

Whether or not the head of the House of Avaro had known what Esperanza was actually like, he'd used him in order to make Gretto abandon his love affair with a maid. Apparently, Lord Avaro had said he was forced to dismiss a maid and asked Esperanza to take her in; the lord didn't know anything about the situation behind the move.

If I tell him about the circumstances, he might make some arrangement with the Avaros.

She'd embraced that hope on her first night there. But for her, it was out of the question to tell a lord, *I'm in love with the younger son of my previous employer, and he loves me as well. I don't want to work here, so please send me back there.*

She just couldn't bring herself to say it, and Elmer had advised her not to. *"Oh, I don't think I'd tell Speran about that. If he found out the truth, he might fly into a rage and challenge Mister Avaro to a duel. And that could create some real trouble for Gretto."*

...And so she'd decided against it at the last minute.

Still, I don't like just waiting... I'm worried, Gretto.

Caught between these complicated feelings, Sylvie went on with her meal. And while her heart was still in shadow, the brilliantly sunny voice of a young man reached her ears.

"Hello there, Speran. Another terrific smile today."

Elmer poked his head into the dining hall, and Esperanza's face clouded over the instant he heard the young man's voice.

"And now it's gone, thanks to you. If you wish to see me smile, don't force me to look at a man's face."

“Ah-ha-ha. There, there. I’ll see if alchemy can be used to change me into a woman. You’d like me more then, wouldn’t you, Speran?”

“What a bizarre thing to... But if all of mankind became women, that would be heaven, wouldn’t it...?” the lord muttered to himself thoughtfully, while Elmer calmly stated his business.

“You say that quite a lot, don’t you? By the way, how about it? Did you find Huey?”

“I’d like to ask that myself. In fact, for the sake of thoroughness, I shall. You really haven’t seen him?”

“No, I haven’t seen him, and I haven’t gotten a letter or message, either. I’m not lying.”

“I see... Then I believe you.” Esperanza frowned. Then his eyes flew open in sudden realization, and he turned to Sylvie.

“Ah. There is one thing I must tell you, Miss Sylvie. This Elmer fellow is an incorrigible liar, but when he tells you he isn’t lying, you may consider what he says to be the truth. Nothing he says is of any importance, and yet he is honest about the strangest things.”

Esperanza’s peculiar habit of speaking to men and women in entirely different ways was something she’d gotten used to over the past ten days. Sylvie said only, “Is that right? I see. Thank you,” then did her best not to get in the way of the pair’s conversation.

Whether or not he’d noticed her attempt to be tactful, Elmer went on talking to Esperanza, who was still turned toward Sylvie.

“More importantly, Speran. There’s something I’d like to ask about, too. Was it really Huey you ran into ten days back? There’s no possibility that it could have been somebody else in disguise, or Huey’s twin brother? You’ve never met him in person, so it could have been a sibling of his who had the same hair and eye color.”

“Does he have siblings?”

“No.”

“Then why ask, you fool...?”

Esperanza scowled and hauled Elmer up by his collar, one-handed.

“There, there, Your Excellency.”

“The things Elmer says are never logical, you know.”

As the serving women scolded him, giggling, Esperanza nodded with dignity.

“They’re absolutely right. You’re a fortunate fellow, Elmer. Be grateful to them that you’ll survive the day.”

In response to the lord’s alarming words, Elmer smiled brightly at the women.

“Oh, good! Because of you, I get to live longer! Thank you!”

He really does seem to enjoy life, Sylvie thought, watching Elmer.

True, his constant positivity made it hard to tell what he was thinking, and it was even unsettling.

Still, she admired his cheerfulness and optimism.

Yes. I’ll smile. If I see Gretto again, we’ll smile together, and smile, and smile...

And then... What should we do?

We can’t just wait like this.

We have to do something about it.

She knew they were being pressed to make a decision.

She also knew that waiting the way Gretto did wasn’t one of their options.

However, she didn’t deny Gretto. After all, she believed that his passive stance was both a flaw and a virtue.

Gretto can wait; that's all right.

I just need to go grab his arm.

She really was timid, and her position wasn't a strong one, either. But she was far from weak.

As she went on with her meal, Sylvie kept thinking.

It wouldn't be possible for her and Gretto to act on their feelings while everyone else was happy and unscathed.

In that case, who should she prepare to make an enemy of?

She kept thinking.

Quietly, secretly—like a panther sharpening its claws in the darkness and choosing its prey.

She was unaware that she would be turning her fangs on a man she hadn't yet met.



The Third Library, Lotto Valentino

"Let me ask you again. You truly have no idea who the culprit might be?"

Carla had come alone, without any bodyguards.

Maiza's face was grave. "I don't. If I knew, I'd either have told you long before this, or I'd be persuading them to stop."

The two of them were standing and talking near the entrance of the library, and they were clearly not two acquaintances having a friendly chat.

Carla suspected that this incident was the alchemists' doing, and that it was deeply connected to the Mask Makers' disturbance the previous year.

Her suspicions had immediately turned on the Third Library, which was the town's largest workshop and a school for alchemists, but the previous ten days hadn't yielded any clues to speak of.

Even though she persisted in suspecting his alchemy studio, Maiza never looked obviously cross as he spoke with her. After all, he himself had guessed that more than a few alchemists were involved in the incident.

"I understand that you doubt us, Carla. But we intend to help you in any way we can in order to end this violence."

"There's no need to be so considerate. I told you as much a year ago; the alchemists aren't the only enemies of the House of Dormентаire. It is everyone in this town, including you," she said sternly. She shrugged a little, possibly remembering what she'd said back then. "Although I may have been exaggerating when I said we would erase you from the map in a year."

"No, the Lotto Valentino I know no longer exists."

"...I see. Then you must hate us."

He had plenty of motives for attacking Dormентаire-related facilities—that was what Carla seemed to be implying, but Maiza gave a small smile and shook his head.

"At the very least, there's no hatred on my part. I didn't like the town to begin with, and I did think someone needed to break it. The control of the Dormentaires might be preferable... But I didn't want the town burned to the ground this way." Maiza sighed, looking around the library. "I studied alchemy because I thought it might give me clues about how to save the town. Yet...the more I learned, the more I came to think that saving it was a hopeless endeavor. That the thought of saving it was arrogant."

"I hear this town was originally built for alchemists. I expect it was a twisted place to begin with. There's no need for you to take it to

heart. If you're going to curse anything, curse your luck in being born here."

Maiza widened his eyes slightly at her unexpected sympathy. "I thought I was under suspicion as well."

"You are an enemy, but only because you belong to Lotto Valentino. If I ignore that, my experience tells me that you are a man worth trusting."

"You give me too much credit. I can't contribute anything to the town where I was born and raised."

"And that's why you're running?"

Maiza had an idea about why she might have said something so abrupt, and he turned back to face her. "What do you mean, 'running'?"

"I hear you'll be leaving town soon."

"...You knew?"

"It's only a rumor. They say several alchemists are going to America on a new ship." Without waiting for Maiza to respond, Carla went on impassively. "I should warn you...the alchemists are primary suspects. I cannot allow that ship to leave port. Even if the count permits it, the House of Dormентаire will probably do everything it can to keep the ship from sailing." Turning away from Maiza, she added, "You should fervently pray that the criminal is apprehended before your departure."

As the Dormентаire envoy, she had changed Lotto Valentino.

Ordinarily, she wouldn't have had to worry about that, but privately, she felt she owed him.

"If we ever meet outside this town...in America, I'll buy you a drink."



A tavern in Lotto Valentino

As a port town, Lotto Valentino was home to multiple taverns where sailors congregated.

These had been exclusively reserved by the House of Dormентаire for the past year, but now the proprietors were worried about being targeted by the bomber, and Carla had given instructions that they were to use civilian facilities as little as possible until the criminal was caught. At the moment, there were no Dormентаire personnel to be seen.

...With the exception of Victor Talbot, a Dormентаire alchemist, who was drinking at a second-floor table.

“I’m an Englishman, and I’ve heard a company called the South Sea Company is going to be formed this year, or maybe it already has. Anyway, a company is being created to sell off slaves from Africa, and no one is stopping it. Frankly, I think the whole thing is bloody ridiculous.”

While it was true that Victor was the only Dormентаire affiliate here, he wasn’t drinking alone.

Denkurou, Zank, and Nile were all at his table, and from the composition of this group alone, it was hard to tell which country this was.

Victor and Denkurou seemed to get along well; after their first meeting ten days ago, they’d met and talked rather frequently.

Most of their conversations consisted of trading information about their respective alchemical specialties, but today, Zank and Nile had been invited to join them in a tavern, so the whole group was there.

Zank had asked Victor why he was working for such an arrogant lot, and Victor, who was a little drunk, had launched into a long story about himself.

“See, I’m an alchemist, even if I’m not much of one, and I wanted to study immortality, homunculi, that sort of thing. So I started researching humans from every angle I could, and ‘s far as I could tell, those slaves were no less flesh and blood than the slave traders.”

“Which should be obvious.” Nile’s expression soured, and Victor smiled back ironically.

“Now *you* have an awful temper, but that’s got nothing to do with race. Anyway, I saw you couldn’t create a hierarchy based on skin color and language. What matters is a good education and good parenting... So a few years ago, I gave some people an earful, and they didn’t like it.”

“And they ran you out of the country?”

“Well, I’ve got nothing against England itself. Queen Anne is still my queen. But some of the nobs around me were saying we *needed* slavery. There’s no place for me in that world.”

As Victor smiled self-deprecatingly, Nile’s expression grew fiercer and fiercer. “Give me the names of these ‘nobs.’ I will flay them and hang them from trees.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Don’t encourage them. They’ll just use that talk to make their point. What if they use it against your countrymen?”

“It matters not. I merely wish to do this for myself. I care not how the results may trouble others.”

“For God’s sake, why are you so violent?” Victor scowled.

“My apologies,” said Denkurou. “He is not malicious. He is merely loyal to his own standards.”

“Malicious, no, but certainly selfish.”

“Say what you will.” Nile devoured his meal, still looking sullen.

Victor looked as if he had more to say, but Zank stepped in. “So you left your country, then?”

There was pressure in his voice, and Victor involuntarily looked his way. “Hmm? Oh, yes. Well, you know.” Giving up on the previous thread of conversation, he went on with his story. “In the end, after I’d left home, the House of Dormентаire picked me up. They’re easy to understand, you see—it doesn’t matter where you’re from. White or black, noble or commoner—if you can make money for the Dormentaires, you can move up in their world. Rumor has it they’ve hand-raised both devil-worshippers and judges for witch hunts.”

Victor’s last comment was unsettling, but Denkurou’s group couldn’t tell whether it was actually true, or really just a rumor. It was likely that even Victor didn’t know.

“I cannot condone the mindset that prioritizes money over all else, either, but...”

Denkurou looked conflicted, but Victor smiled and took a swig from his cup. “That makes two of us. An elephant can grow too fat to walk after a little while. The Dormентаire glory won’t last. Maybe the fall will be year from now, maybe a millennium.”

After he’d made that blunt declaration, Victor’s expression turned a little sad.

“But I do need to repay them for giving me a chance, at least. And besides...”

“Besides?”

“I’m madly in love with a woman.” Victor grinned while Denkurou, Zank and Nile exchanged looks.

“May I surmise from our conversation thus far that she is a servant at the mansion...?” asked Denkurou. “No, that isn’t what it sounded like. She can’t be the aristocrat’s daughter, can she?”

“Ha! She’s old enough to be her own person, not just somebody’s ‘daughter.’ I think she’s in her late twenties now, or maybe her early thirties?”

Remembering the woman, Victor was grinning like a child.

“She’s rich, you see, and she makes no attempt to hide it.”

Thinking about his love, he listed all the worst things about her first.

“She’s quite lovely, both her face and her figure, but she knows exactly how to use them and all her Dormентаire riches. She’ll flirt with anyone who catches her eye, man or woman. She isn’t just unfaithful or capricious—she has her own harem, really.”

Without seeming to care that he was merely one of her many lovers, Victor went on talking about her cheerfully.

“She absolutely has to have everything she wants, whether that’s jewels or money.”

“...And you pledged loyalty to the House of Dormентаire for a woman like that?”

“Well, a man likes what he likes. And she’s not all bad. She’s nothing like the other Dormентаire nobles. She took a peon like me as her lover, and we can speak as friends.”

The implication was that the other nobles of the House of Dormентаire were probably the typical sort who looked down on everyone else. Denkurou couldn’t declare that was a bad thing, but at the very least, he was reminded that it would be best to keep Nile from coming into contact with them.

With that in mind, he responded to Victor diplomatically. “I see. I would have to meet the lady in person before I could form an opinion about her.”

“True. I think you’d be too quiet and boring for her taste.” Victor cackled at his own joke, but he didn’t seem to mean any harm by it.

Denkurou did not take offense, either, and he quietly took another drink of his liquor.

“It’s doubtful whether we will have the opportunity to meet the young lady ourselves at all,” Zank murmured.

Victor smiled again. “Actually, you might meet her.”

“?”

Denkurou and the others looked dubious, and Victor raised his cup, wearing a rather conflicted expression.

“I told her it was too dangerous to come yet. But if she’s already left the continent, there’s no help for it. I’m running her off the second she arrives, but...

“...the beautiful, greedy Lady Dormентаire says she’s coming here, to Lotto Valentino.”



The Boroñal residence The office

“...I see trouble on the horizon,” Esperanza said gloomily.

Elmer’s face lit up. “I thought we had plenty of trouble already, but I suppose it wasn’t as bad as it could get! Well, let’s smile a lot before everything gets worse!”

Ignoring Elmer’s typical antics, Esperanza began speaking with his elbows braced on his work desk.

“Lucrezia de Dormентаire... She’s a young noblewoman among the most powerful members of the House of Dormентаire.”

“Oh? I’ve almost never seen you upset while you’re talking about a woman.”

“Well, if I disregard my own position, nothing could be more welcome than a woman’s arrival in Lotto Valentino. However, she’s related to my position in a rather complicated way.”

Giving a self-deprecating smile, Esperanza asked Elmer a question.

“You know about Maribel’s...Monica Campanella’s connection to the House of Dormентаire, don’t you?”

“Yes, more or less.”

“Exactly what happened back then is a mystery, but at the very least, it’s certain that the House of Dormентаire was involved in her death. And not only her death... Truly, they stole Maribel’s entire life from her.” Esperanza laced his fingers together and rested his chin on them, his elbows still on his desk. “Even I have extraordinary feelings regarding the House of Dormентаire,” he said flatly. “If the individual coming here weren’t a woman, I might forget my position. I could not tell you what I would do.”

“But she’s a woman, so you’ll probably be able to accept her with a genuine smile. If it’s you, Speran.”

“And what is wrong with that?” Esperanza retorted bluntly. He put his hands against his lips and thought. “...No, there is a problem, isn’t there? Yes, of course there is.”

“There you go again. When there aren’t any women around, you don’t know what to do with yourself. You turn aggressive, then timid... You’ve left your whole heart in the presence of women, haven’t you?”

“What is wrong with that? ...Nothing. Nothing, I suppose.”

“Of course not! If you’re guaranteed to smile in front of women, then I have no complaints whatsoever. That means there won’t be a problem if the Dormентаire lady comes here, either!” Elmer cried happily, spinning around near the door to the office.

Esperanza sighed and turned cold eyes on Elmer. He opened his mouth and shut it several times, attempting to say something, then finally gave up and heaved a deep sigh.

“You really are a... No, I won’t say it.”

“?”

“At any rate. Even if this situation does not trouble you, it is a significant problem for the town. In particular, the House of Dormентаire is the enemy of Ma—of Monica and her life. No doubt certain people will be extremely angry when I don’t do anything to one of their number. I would have liked you to be in that category, but I suppose that was a lapse in judgment.”

“I think you just said something rude about me, but I’ve probably insulted you, too, so I’m sorry.”

As Elmer apologized with a smile, Esperanza gave another heavy sigh. Giving up on Elmer, he brought up the name of a certain man.

“Huey Laforet.”

“Ah, I knew it. The conversation’s going back there.”

Elmer nodded, looking as if he’d seen that coming. The young man had several bats in his belfry, but he wasn’t a fool. He knew where the conversation would lead, and he had just kept saying what he wanted to say anyway. Of course, that part of him was one of the reasons he tended not to fit in.

“I’m not sure about Huey. I think I can imagine what he would have done a year ago, but now that Moni-Moni’s gone, I don’t know what he’ll do. After all, I haven’t even seen him.”

“I expect not.” Esperanza stood and looked out the window at the lights of the town. “If he were using Monica as an excuse to perpetrate these bombings, I would resent him for it. I suppose I would reject everything about him, including his character and his

past with her. However, when I actually met him, I sensed that he isn't...quite what I would call an avenger."

"But he may be bombing the Dormentaires and the rest of Lotto Valentino— Oh, let's just assume he is doing it," Elmer said bluntly.

Esperanza had known him for a long time, and he was aware that even if Huey Laforet had been a Roman emperor or a pleasure-killer like Gilles de Rais, Elmer would have connected with him with no difficulty whatsoever.

To Elmer, it didn't matter one bit whether Huey Laforet was behind the bombings or not, or even what his motives were. If he did care about motives, there was only one reason for it—he would use it to get the other person to smile, and then do it.

"If Huey said that getting revenge on the Dormentaires would make him smile, I'd gladly help him. No matter what he's trying to do, I'm on the side of his smile."

"....."

"Of course, my goal is to make everybody on the planet smile, him included."

"A hopeless dream."

He didn't call him a hypocrite; Esperanza did know Elmer wasn't seeking smiles out of goodwill or anything like it. He was just true to his own desires.

"If you want to make your wish come true, you will really have to change the world itself. The creation of the philosopher's stone would be a far shorter and simpler journey, if I may use terms suited to an alchemist such as yourself."

"If there's a road to travel on, I'll be able to get there someday."

Gazing at his own palms, Elmer said the last few words in a quiet murmur.

“So I’d like to figure out a way to live a long time.”



That same day, late at night Somewhere on the maritime fortress

“Hmm... I suppose it’s about time I took myself to the Third Library.”

Near the edge of the fortress formed from ranks of Dormентаire ships...

...a cabin at the farthest point from land had been filled with various instruments and books, giving the place a very unique atmosphere.

Because even the slightest motion from the waves would affect them, there were no instruments for precision work here, but the facilities were still better than what you’d find in the studios of average alchemists.

In that cabin, Szilard Quates was muttering to himself. In the mere ten days since he’d arrived in this town, he’d issued instructions to the Dormентаire private soldiers and pulled all these facilities together.

I thought this was a provincial town. To think I’d acquire this array of alchemical implements so easily... No wonder they call it a town built for alchemists.

Impressed by the equipment available to him here, Szilard glanced through a document that had been placed on the desk.

The document had arrived in an envelope with the Dormентаire crest, but the strings of letters on it didn’t form words. The lines simply created a strange pattern.

Apparently, it was a coded letter of instruction, and Szilard was skimming through it, without using any chart to help him decipher it.

“...Hmph.” He snorted lightly, then held the document up to the flame of the candle. Red light enveloped the coded letter, and the

old man tossed the blazing sheets of paper into the ash receptacle on his work desk.

As he watched the letter of instruction turn to ashes, the old man grinned.

For heaven's sake. Both the Dormентаire lot and the lot from this town are truly benighted. They genuinely believe this secret elixir of immortality exists...

Szilard was an alchemist, but he was also a firm realist. With regard to the creation of gold, he'd frequently told Victor, "Albertus Magnus offered his misgivings on the subject a full five centuries ago, and my feelings are similar."

He believed even the creation of gold was impossible, and as far as he was concerned, an elixir of immortality was a delusional fantasy.

The exception was his interest in homunculi, and he'd been conducting an uncommon amount of research into them. If immortality existed, he believed the one road to it would be to transplant your own memories and personality—in other words, your mind itself—into an artificial life-form.

In Ancient Greece, Hippocrates had said that human reason and emotions, or "the spirit," were based in the workings of the brain, not the heart. However, the idea that the heart dwelled in the brain hadn't really begun to spread until after the seventeenth century.

In that sense, Szilard was from the generation that had been born right after common sense regarding the brain had been overturned, and building from that foundation, he'd begun to think that spirit transplants might be possible.

But in this era, the mechanism by which bioelectricity was used to transmit nerve signals hadn't yet been discovered; the idea was no more than an elusive dream.

He had been pursuing cutting-edge research for his time, and yet an elixir of immortality still sounded like a mere fairy tale.

We've received word that Dalton, the head of the Third Library, has passed knowledge about the secret elixir of immortality on to a young alchemist named Maiza Avaro. It would not be wise to make an enemy of Dalton. Obtain that method from Maiza.

Maiza Avaro will join other alchemists in boarding a ship called the Advena Avis. He intends to disappear in America along with the know-how. Board the ship with him and learn about the elixir.

In simple terms, those had been the instructions in the coded letter.

They didn't even tell me to ascertain whether it was true or false. Does the House of Dormентаire intend to grasp all knowledge, including that which may be spurious? I suppose with their prosperity, immortality is the next desire they might have...

Still, immortality from a single draft of an elixir? What a ridiculous notion...

His thoughts were interrupted as a wind blew into the room.

The candle flames wavered violently, and the ashes from the incinerated letter scattered.

"Hmm..."

Realizing the window had been opened, Szilard narrowed his eyes and scanned the room.

When he did, he found a solitary figure in the shadows of a corner.

"You're...", the old alchemist muttered, frowning. The man who had appeared before him wore a hooded cloak.

His one distinguishing feature was—a pure white mask, the sort one might wear to a masquerade ball or the carnival in Venice, that covered his entire face.

A few minutes later, hearing a roar, the Dormentaire soldiers and the people who lived around the port saw a sight they would not soon forget.

Near the edge of the maritime fortress, the ship that Szilard Quates had turned into an impromptu workshop was now an inferno of red flames and black smoke.

It was promptly cut free from the neighboring ships, saving the fortress itself from the flames.

Some of the witnesses saw one more thing: a small boat, moving away from the chaos on the fortress.

And inside it, a man who wore a mask.

As soon as he reached land, the masked man vanished into a dark alley. When they saw him, the townspeople were convinced—the Mask Maker had returned.

They were also afraid.

Afraid that the Dormentaires and the Mask Maker might burn their town to ashes.

These were the “ordinary people” who had once worked slaves to death and ruled the town with drugs—
—and they could do nothing but tremble in fear before the flames.



One hour later The Avaro residence

“I knew it. It’s not over. It’s not over yet.”

Gretto’s legs were quaking, and he chewed on his thumbnail, unaware he was doing it.

He was sitting on the edge of the bed in the dark, talking to himself.

An hour earlier, he'd heard a ruckus in the town and looked out his window. He'd seen a slight red tinge to the night sky in the direction of the port.

By now, the flames had been extinguished, and the night was still again.

Gretto was trembling with the reverberations of the uproar—but it wasn't from fear that he himself might become involved.

"Good... Good..."

He was trembling with *hope*. Lotto Valentino, the world he'd always known, was breaking apart.

At first, the aristocrats had intended to stand by and let the situation run its course. They seemed to think that if this was a fight between the Dormentaires and the Mask Makers, then the two factions could just take each other out.

However, when their own mansions came under attack, their attitude changed dramatically. They hadn't done anything to stop the Dormentaire invasion, so they might be targeted by Mask Maker attacks as well. Thanks to that fear, each of the nobles was hiring their own private soldiers and putting them on guard duty.

But with the exception of the port, Lotto Valentino was a closed city. There were no proper mercenary groups, and the best they could do was give money to the town hoodlums and have them keep an eye on the area.

That meant the security was full of holes.

Invaders could easily get into Gretto's room, even though he was being kept under house arrest.

A wind blew into the room, and Gretto flinched, shivering.

"...Wh-who's there?!"

When he turned around, he saw a hazy shape in the light from the window, the only light in the room.

Gretto's lips were quivering with panic. The phantom wore a hooded cloak and a white mask, glinting in the moonlight.



Thirty minutes later Esperanza's residence

Sylvie was awakened by a commotion in the corridor.

A strange sense of unease made sure she was wide awake almost immediately. Retrieving her glasses from her bedside table, she pulled on a simple wrap, then opened the door.

When she stepped out into the corridor, the butler, one of the few men who worked at this mansion, was speaking about something with Esperanza. Sylvie also spotted a few maids who'd apparently awakened earlier than she had.

They were all looking out of the windows. Elmer was there with them; when he noticed Sylvie was awake, he came over to her.

"Oh, you're up. I'm sorry we were noisy."

"Um, what's the matter? What on earth is...?" Sylvie asked anxiously.

After a little hesitation, Elmer slowly said, "Stay calm, all right?" Unusually for him, his expression was solemn. "We think Maiza's house is on fire."

"...What?!"

As the meaning of the words sank in, her vision went dark for a moment. She felt as if something was squeezing her, particularly her heart.

Her breathing quickened, and her face was pale. Somehow, she managed to get her vocal cords to work.

“Gretto’s...house?”

If she’d looked out the window, she might have been able to see smoke. But Sylvie’s whole body had gone stiff, and she couldn’t even turn her eyes that way, let alone move.

Elmer tried to set her mind at ease. “I’m sure he’s all right. It’s not as if the whole house burned down; it was only a small fire—”

He didn’t manage to finish his sentence.

Sylvie had already broken into a run, heading for the mansion’s front door with worry on her face.

“Ah— Wait!” he called to her, but she didn’t seem to hear. “I’ll go, too! Let me come!” Elmer hastily ran after her.

He wasn’t trying to protect her from danger—once she knew Gretto was safe, the relief might make her smile from the bottom of her heart. *He wanted to see that smile, no matter what.*

That was his motive for trying to stop her, and for running after her.

Conversely, if Gretto was dead or badly injured, she would be sad, and smiles would become more of a foreign concept to her. *He’d have to get her to smile.*

At his core, that was the true nature of Elmer C. Albatross.

However, neither of Elmer’s wishes came true.

The police and the House of Avaro’s private soldiers had arrived and blocked the way, so Sylvie wasn’t able to get into the house.

She asked whether Gretto was all right over and over, but the head of the House of Avaro must have issued instructions with regard to her. Nobody would tell her anything, and they ejected her from the mansion without any explanation.

Behind her, Elmer said, "I'm sure Gretto's all right. I don't think he'd be happy to see you so sad, you know? You should smile. C'mon, smile, smile."

Even under these circumstances, he was still talking about smiles. Sylvie glared at him sharply. She even considered slapping him, but he was keeping a step away from her and refused to come any closer.

"...?" Her angry glare took on a hint of confusion, and Elmer explained.

"Oh, sorry, sorry. If I get too close to you, Gretto might see us through a window and think you're cheating on him with me. That would be awful."

What a strange thing to be concerned about.

Ordinarily, Sylvie would have thought no more than that, but he was saying this in front of a mansion that was still smoking. He seemed completely unaffected by the whole affair.

It left Sylvie terribly unsettled; the chill she'd felt when she first met him crept up her spine again, several times worse than before.

He wasn't a bad person, but he was a complete enigma.

That was the impression of Elmer that Sylvie would have for *a very long time*.



The next day The maritime fortress

"So the damage from last night was old Szilard's ship and one of the aristocrats' mansions up on the hill?"

"Yes. We've had no reports of other fires."

It was afternoon in the port, and the sun was already starting its journey down the sky.

The pungent smell of various burned chemicals mingled with the scent of the tide.

The fire in Szilard's workshop had spread, half destroying the ship, and the vessel had tipped onto its side and flooded. Wisps of smoke were rising from it here and there.

"And no fatalities, I heard?"

Standing on the deck of another ship in the maritime fortress, Victor gazed out over the scene of the incident.

Beside him, Carla said, "Correct. Fortunately, once again, there were no casualties that evening. Szilard and the House of Avaro's younger son seem to have sustained light burns, but Szilard says he'll treat his himself, and the boy has gone to an alchemist in town."

"To an alchemist? Ah. No church hospitals."

"Yes. Several alchemists here also serve as doctors."

In medieval Europe, medical treatments such as bloodletting had often been conducted by barbers, but now, after the Renaissance, there were many doctors who specialized exclusively in medicine. Several historic figures had worked as both alchemists and doctors, and apparently, quite a few people studied both medicine and alchemy in Lotto Valentino. When people were injured or sick, the majority were taken to an alchemist's studio.

"Which studio?"

"It's the one the Avaros have ties to, the Meyer family's."

"...Huh. The Dormentaires send them money, don't they?"

"They do. The uproar in town has made our spies mostly useless, so we've hardly needed much from them lately, but he's also..." Carla paused to make sure there was no one nearby. "We do give them support, and so they make regular contact. In this town, the Meyer

family primarily uses a servant girl as a courier, but...that regular contact includes ordinary meetings as their sponsor.”

“In other words, you can meet right in front of the townsfolk, so long as they don’t overhear what you’re talking about.”

“Once the town was in our hands, the spy became unnecessary. However, now that these Mask Maker attacks are occurring, we need him to investigate the local situation for us again.”

“Yes, I’ve met the people around that spy... I spoke with the young lady as well, and she told me the residents here are all deplorable bastards. I’d rather have gone somewhere more cheery, like Naples.”

He’d heard about Niki’s past both from Carla and from the alchemist who was their spy.

There had always been a rift between the girl and the townspeople that kept her from being a suitable spy. But as an outsider, she worked very well as the courier who made contact with the Dormентаire personnel.

“I agree with you for the most part, but there are some decent people.”

“Ah, the proprietress of the patisserie seemed a decent woman. I’ve also heard there are a few respectable sorts among the nobles and alchemists. Particularly that lord—Esteranzo? Niki was very fond of him. Although the bastards in town don’t seem to like him much.”

From the way Victor spoke of them, Carla could tell that he genuinely hated the townspeople. Recently, he’d been drinking with some visiting foreign alchemists; maybe that was because he wanted to have as little to do with the locals as possible.

As Carla made that guess, Victor’s expression abruptly softened.

“Well, they all agree that he’s eccentric. Maybe I should pay him a visit myself.”

“No, that fellow won’t open his heart to anyone who isn’t a woman. Even if you went, Victor, I doubt he’d welcome you.”

“Is that right? Come to think of it, you said something like that before. Are you saying he opened his heart to you?” Victor asked, deflating slightly.

Carla shook her head slightly, smiling wryly. “Don’t tease me, please. But I suppose he did accept both my rank and my manner of dress without any questions at all. Unlike you.”

“...You’ll never forgive me for that, will you? Well, I am sorry for that first meeting, especially after you pinned me down and Lucrezia mocked me for ages afterward. I’ll be happy to forget it soon.”

Saying Lucrezia’s name seemed to have turned his thoughts to her; Victor’s expression softened a bit.

“Once she sees the situation here, I’m sure she’ll be mocking me plenty more,” he murmured, his gaze far out to sea.

There were no eye-catching silhouettes of ships on the horizon, but he seemed to be looking beyond.

“She said she’d arrive today, didn’t she?”

“Yes, a report came by post-horse from the port where they’d anchored previously.”

“Wouldn’t it have been faster for her to come by horse, then?”

Lucrezia de Dormентаire—a noblewoman who was both Victor’s employer and his lover.

She had personally boarded a ship and was coming here to Lotto Valentino. He’d learned as much a few moments before he’d treated Denkurou’s group to their drinks the other day.

He knew she'd been visiting one of her summer villas near this town for the past few months, but he'd never dreamed she'd come in person.

"Damn. So the reports I've sent over the past few days all missed her?"

"No, I expect they were given to her at the ports where they anchored along the way."

"Then maybe she's coming to see me—I did ask her if she was lonely a few times in my first letter..." Victor grinned, but Carla's expression was blank as she responded.

"I doubt it. If she was lonely, she'd just invite someone else to her bed. You may be an important alchemist, but frankly, when it comes to Lady Lucrezia's affections, I think you may be rather low priority."

"Damn, no mercy..." Victor winced, then went on to disguise his pain. "How is she able to travel with the War of the Spanish Succession raging all around us? The other Dormентаire elite are desperately campaigning."

"The consensus among the Dormentaires is that once Joseph I passes away and Archduke Charles is crowned emperor, the war is likely to come to an end in a few years' time. Of course, Lady Lucrezia has always ignored matters of war and diplomacy; it's likely that the political situation has nothing to do with it."

"...I suppose that's true. After all, she took an interest in a town of alchemists when there's a war on. This place really is eerie. We're not far from Naples, which is Austrian territory now, but the people here hardly know anything about the war, it seems."

He probably had a thing or two on his mind. He lowered his voice, talking almost to himself.

“Instead of a nation, Lotto Valentino’s been occupied by the House of Dormентаire, and the Mask Makers or what have you are staging a violent resistance. Plus, most of the townspeople are bastards. I tell you, I despise this damnable place.”

Gazing at the horizon again, Victor let his thoughts run to the ship, which he couldn’t yet see.

“Well, that’s all right. I’ll protect that greedy she-cat once she arrives. Although I plan to tell her to go home as soon as she does.”

“Leave the guarding to us and focus on your own job, if you would,” Carla replied tartly.

Victor shrugged. “Don’t be so cross. We’re both her toys, little mice in the cat’s claws.

“You know she’s toying with the guards on that ship as we speak.”



At sea On board the House of Dormентаire ship

On the way from certain Dormентаire lands to Lotto Valentino...

The glittering ocean was beautiful, if a bit of a tiresome view by now, and a ship with ornamentation that grew particularly gaudy on its bow and stern was sailing over it.

Its banners and sails were marked with an hourglass motif, the Dormентаire crest.

Sailors were bustling about on deck, but the mingled smells of sweat and the tide were masked by another scent that hung over the entire vessel.

Just as Cleopatra was once said to have made her ships smell of roses, this ship was filled with a sweet fragrance reminiscent of peaches. Possibly as an insect deterrent, it was laced with a faint herbal scent.

The ship's interior was extravagantly decorated as well, so much so that it might have been mistaken for the inside of an aristocratic mansion were it not for the ocean view.

In a room full of splendid, gleaming ornamentation, the sound of a small sneeze echoed.

"Oh dear. I do believe someone's gossiping about me."

A noblewoman in a luxurious dress—Lucrezia de Dormентаire—closed her peacock feather fan with a snap. Her dress wasn't the style that was fashionable in Europe, the sort that combined a hoop skirt and corset. Instead, it was made of rather thin fabric that accentuated the lines of her figure and boldly exposed her legs. The dress was unique to the House of Dormентаire, and there were no plans to distribute the fashion beyond it, so the style didn't have any particular name. However, the shape was similar to the cheongsam, which would be created a few hundred years later, but with additional ornamentation.

The contours of her figure were dramatic enough that no corset was necessary, and the glimpses of skin through the gaps in the material were as smooth as silk.

She might have been in her midtwenties. She was an alluring woman, though her skin was extremely youthful for her age.

"If memory serves, we'll arrive shortly, won't we? It seems to have taken no time at all." Without waiting for her subordinates to respond, she raised her arms and slowly stretched. "Mmmm. I am looking forward to it, aren't you? I wonder how dear Carla and Victor are faring as they struggle to cope with the naughty, naughty children who've defied the House of Dormентаire."

Her manner of speech was as sticky as honey, but her guards found it more stimulating than irritating.

The guards and servants in the room were of all ages and genders, even boys who were young enough to count as children.

Lucrezia sat on the cabin's opulent bed. She seemed to be speaking to the room in general rather than to anyone in particular.

"Of all the reports on Lotto Valentino, the one I liked best was about the toilets."

"The toilets, madam?"

The servants looked puzzled.

Lucrezia giggled, then explained merrily: "Yes. The town draws a water supply from a lake in the nearby mountains, and it's even equipped with sewers. The flush toilet facilities are perfect, just like Ancient Rome. I heard you can find them anywhere—the houses of aristocrats and ordinary people, and even public facilities like libraries. Astonishing, isn't it?"

"Very much so, madam."

"I hear that in some country—oh, I forget where—the towns smelled absolutely dreadful, and the palace had nothing but chamber pots. And yet this remote port town has such magnificent sewer facilities. I haven't heard of anything like it since that island, Gro... Oh, I can't remember the name. The one darling Strassburg's from. They say he built the facilities over there, so the alchemists who created this town must have worked very hard indeed. How admirable of them..."

Although the subject of toilets was a complete mismatch with the room's elegant atmosphere, Lucrezia went on and on. One could have said the bold dress that exposed her legs didn't suit this cabin or her rank as an eminent noblewoman, either, but she couldn't have cared less.

It wasn't that she didn't understand such subtleties. She did understand; she simply said what she liked and wore what she wanted without a blush.

It was almost as if she was boasting to those around her that the world should adjust to suit her.

After the talk about toilets, Lucrezia continued speaking on whatever topic struck her fancy, but it didn't seem to annoy the servants. Was she that good at conversation, or were they so infatuated with her that simply hearing her speak was pleasurable? Only the servants themselves knew.

"It's almost time, isn't it?"

The conversation ended when she looked at the clock.

One of the youngest servants replied deferentially. "Yes, madam. It won't take another hour."

"I see... I really am looking forward to this. I wonder how sweet Carla and dear Victor will react."

Her smile was arrogant and yet simple and childlike. It wasn't condescending, nor was it fawning.

With eyes that seemed to say she was the world itself, she smiled on all of creation. Her affection was as for a lover who was her equal.

Victor was also part of the world she loved.

To her, that was all he was, but for that very reason, one could say she adored her multitude of lovers equally.

The fact that this was permitted was proof she was a member of the House of Dormентаire.

But in Lotto Valentino, the only eyes dazzled by the glory of the Dormentaires might have been her own...



Afternoon The Third Library, Lotto Valentino

“Gretto!” Sylvie screamed, running toward the startled young man who was sitting up in bed.

“Syl...Sylvie? What are you doing here?”

“Oh, thank goodness... I’m so glad you’re safe, Gretto!”

Even before she answered the young man’s question, Sylvie had flung herself into his arms.

The impact knocked her glasses askew, and her tears fell on the youth’s bandages and soaked in.

She’d been thinking of meeting Gretto for nearly half a month, but she’d never expected her wish to come true this way. She wasn’t able to think anymore; she had converted her delight into momentum and clung to him.

Gretto didn’t seem to have been emotionally prepared for this, however, and his expression turned to anguish when she leaped at him.

“Ghk!” he yelped.

“Oh! I-I’m sorry!” Sylvie said, noticing Gretto’s bandages.

At the same time, a different voice spoke from behind her.

“No, no, no, you mustn’t do that. If you touch him, his burns will... Yeek?!”

Partway through her sentence, the woman took a magnificent tumble right into Sylvie.

“Gwaaugh?!” Gretto screamed even louder than he had earlier.

“G-Gretto...! Are you all right?!” Sylvie hastily helped him up, looking back at the woman who’d fallen. She was an adult who wore glasses

like Sylvie's own, and she was holding her forehead and staggering a bit as she got to her feet.

"Ow-ow-ow-ow... I'm very sorry about that."

"U-um, who are you?" Sylvie asked timidly.

"Hello there! That's Maestra Renee," Elmer answered as he walked through the door. "She's my teacher, and at this library, she's also the doctor who treats injuries."

"Elmer..."

Partly because of the incident the day before, Sylvie still felt some distance between herself and Elmer, but that explanation satisfied her for the moment.

The first place she'd run to had been the Meyer residence.

Around noon, Elmer had brought the news that Gretto had been taken to an alchemist with ties to the House of Avaro for treatment, and she'd hastily dashed out of Esperanza's mansion.

However, Gretto had already left the Meyer residence, and after hearing the story from Begg, she'd rushed here, to the Third Library.

"I'm glad... I'm so glad you're safe, Gretto...!"

"Me too! Are you hurt, Sylvie? That lord hasn't done anything to you, has he?!"

"Huh? Oh, no. Actually..."

Thinking it was probably best to clear up Gretto's misunderstanding about the lord, if only to set his mind at ease, Sylvie slowly began explaining what had happened in the past ten days.

Meanwhile, Elmer spoke to *another individual who was near the back of the room*.

"Erm...Fermet, isn't it? Why is Gretto at the Third Library?"

Fermet, who'd been leaning back in the shadows of the room, murmured with a breezy smile. "It's been a long time, Elmer. In answer to your question, because it had better medical facilities than the Meyer residence. And besides..." He paused to listen to the approaching footsteps outside the infirmary. "Maiza is here as well."

With excellent timing, the door opened to reveal a breathless Maiza.

"Gretto..."

"Maiza!"

"Are you all right? ...Well, from looking at you, your life doesn't seem to be in any danger." He smiled with relief—but the smile promptly vanished as he started questioning his brother. "What on earth happened? Was the culprit a Mask Maker?" Maiza's sharp eyes narrowed even further, and his expression was tense.

Gretto gave a small nod, then began to relate the incident in detail. "Someone wearing a mask came into my room all of a sudden... He threw something at the wall. I think it was made of pottery or something; the second it broke, fire suddenly blazed up from it..."

"Dammit... Blast that Mask Maker. What in the world is he after?"

"He hasn't shown himself before, yet now it's as if he wants to be noticed. Do you suppose he intends to accomplish something by it?" Elmer asked.

Fermet spoke next. "The culprit behind this incident may not be the one who's perpetrating the serial bombings, you know. Perhaps someone with a grudge against Gretto is trying to pin the blame on the Mask Makers."

"It's possible, but... I am speaking as his brother, of course, but Gretto isn't the type to make enemies of such dangerous characters." Maiza sounded completely confident, and Gretto also rushed to protest.

“No... I don’t remember making an enemy of anybody!”

“My apologies. I meant no offense. But you could be a saint, Gretto, and a criminal might still have twisted, misplaced resentment against you.”

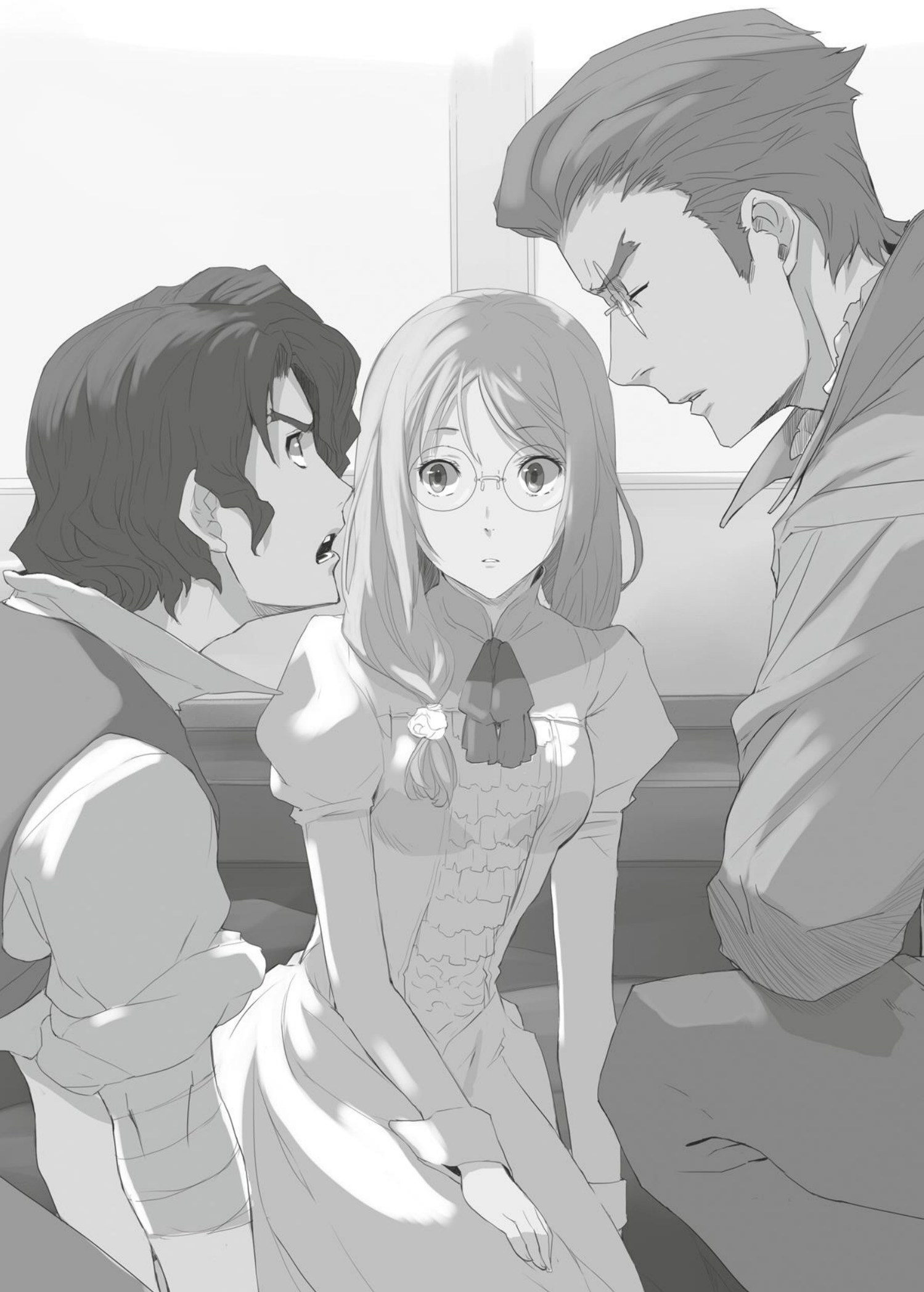
Maiza nodded. “That’s true.” Anger blazed in his eyes, something that had become unusual for him since he began studying alchemy.

“Damn him... He won’t get away with this.”

“Whoever did this to Gretto, he will pay for it!” Sylvie’s voice was firm, equally unusual for her. The look in her eyes seemed to say that when she found the criminal, she would give him burns that were the same as—or worse than—Gretto’s.

However, Gretto quietly shook his head and tried to dissuade the two of them. “It’s all right. To be honest, I’d like to thank him. He let me see Sylvie...and being brought here, to this library, may have given me a chance.”

“? What are you saying, Gretto?” Maiza frowned.



Gretto asked him a question, a determined look in his eyes. “Maiza... You’re leaving town, aren’t you? You’re taking the ship that’s arriving in port today, the *Advena Avis*.”

“!” Maiza was startled, and Fermet bowed his head.

“I’m terribly sorry. I had no idea you hadn’t yet talked it over with your family...”

“...I see. No, it’s nothing you need to apologize for, Fermet. I’m to blame for keeping quiet about it.”

As they watched Maiza apologize to Fermet, Elmer and Sylvie only stared; they had no idea what this was about.

Meanwhile, Gretto spoke to his brother insistently. “I have many questions—why you didn’t say anything, whether you were planning to say after this, why you’re leaving town at all—but *I won’t ask you any of them, Maiza*. I only...”

Pausing for a moment, he looked at Sylvie.

The sight of her face seemed to help him find his resolve. He clenched his fists and went on.

“I only have a favor to ask in exchange.”

“A favor?”

In the next moment...Gretto summoned all the courage he had from the depths of his heart after spending so long waiting for change.

“I want you...to bring me. And Sylvie. Take us with you on that ship!”



The library’s special reference room

“None of them have changed.”

Even though it was daytime, a lantern flickered in the gloomy special reference room, where Dalton was seated at his desk listening to his

guest. The young man who had come to visit him did not look up from the book in his hands as he spoke.

“Especially Elmer. He hasn’t changed a bit, and I doubt he ever will.”

“That is true of him, yes... And what about you? Have you changed a little, over this past year?”

“My view of the world has certainly changed, but I leave the decision of whether I myself have to you, Maestro Dalton.” As he paged through his book, the young man, Huey Laforet, smiled thinly. “A person may not need a year to change,” he impassively told his former teacher. “It only takes a moment to discard everything you’ve ever been.”

“Not everyone would.”

“No. Humans are endlessly diverse, from the iron-willed ones who choose to hold on to their former selves, to those who are simply too weak to throw it away. Ultimately, the true essence of human good and evil is probably relatively superficial. Just individual differences, nothing more.”

“You speak as if you are not one yourself,” said Dalton.

Huey closed the book and turned to face his teacher for the first time. “A human can only speak of others as their own eyes see them. If you deliberately add yourself to the results of your observations, those results couldn’t possibly be accurate.”

“What answer are you seeking? I hear you told Esperanza that you were looking for Monica.”

“I meant exactly what I said. I only want to fulfill my promise to her and make my modest wish come true. Even if I have to sacrifice the whole world to do it.”

“I see. I hope you find her.”

As if Dalton had picked up on the intent that lay behind Huey's odd reply, he didn't press him further. He didn't try to criticize him or have him arrested; he simply replied with an equal lack of emotion.

"So what brings you here? I doubt you'd go out of your way to pay your respects to me when you haven't even gone to see Elmer."

"Yes, there were a few things I wanted to confirm."

Before he could say any more, the door to the reference room opened.

Renee, who had gone to check on the situation in the infirmary, had returned. "Oh, Dalton, listen to this! Maiza and Gretto have started arguing something awful. I had to leave because I felt I didn't belong... Huh? Wait, is that you, Huey?! When did you come back?! You surprised me!"

The alchemist was walking toward him, eyes wide.

Still smiling softly—Huey slashed her hand with a small knife he'd concealed in his right palm.

"Huh?? ...Oh, ouch!! Wh-what are you doing, Huey?! Are you rebelling against your teacher?! Have you reached that age?! Oh, that hurt! Your teacher is very upset!"

Despite her complaints, she didn't sound like someone who had just been cut. As he watched their exchange, Dalton gave a little sigh. Huey was looking at Renee's blood on the floor.

After a few seconds, the drops on the floorboards slid toward Renee's feet, then under her skirt. Red lines appeared and disappeared on her clothes as they crawled up her leg and made their way straight toward her wound.

At last, when all the blood had been drawn back into the wound, the wound itself vanished as though it had never been there at all.

The sight was nothing anyone would expect to see in the realm of common sense, but Huey didn't seem particularly agitated. Putting the knife away, he apologized to Renee, who was still pouting and protesting.

"I beg your pardon, Maestra Renee. To make this up to you, I'll be your guinea pig or anything you like sometime in the future."

"Huh? Do you mean it? Oh, thank you very much! Let's see, what experiment should I have you help me with...? Umm, give me a little time to decide, all right?!"

"Yes, take as long as you need. I'll wait." Aside from the act that had directly preceded it, nothing seemed strange about the conversation. Turning back to Dalton, Huey apologized to him as well. "I'm sorry. I wanted to see it with my own eyes."

"Couldn't you have cut me instead of Renee?"

"I'd intended to, Maestro Dalton, but you never gave me a chance to."

It wasn't clear how much of that remark had been serious, but as Huey went on, his smile didn't slip at all.

"Now that we understand each other, there's a favor I'd like to ask you."

"What is it?"

He'd just seen a wound repair itself and blood return to the body, a sight that went against natural law. Even so, the young man's face was tranquil, and his quiet smile actually seemed rather cold.

Still wearing that smile, his gaze went to a certain register that lay on Dalton's desk.

"*The Advena Avis.*"

"....."

Dalton was silent, although he appeared to know what Huey was getting at. Without the slightest hesitation, Huey made a presumptuous request.

“I’d like you to add my name to that passenger list.”



Evening The port, Lotto Valentino

“There, you can see it now; that’s the ship. Gah, it’s still practically on the horizon, and I can smell peaches already.”

“She’s sailing without an escort ship. Will she be all right?”

“That ship is special. She’s one of a kind, built for speed, so no escort ship or enemy vessel could catch up to her. The other reason could be because this is a secret voyage, although that sweet smell defeats the purpose.”

As the sweet scent tickled his nostrils in the salt wind, Victor grinned and flung his arms wide.

He was obviously enjoying himself, and Denkurou, Zank, and Nile each expressed their thoughts on the subject.

“Hmm. You seem pleased, Victor.”

“For goodness’ sake. You might as well be a young boy.”

“Let me just say this: If this woman is not satisfactory, I will hurl you into the ocean.”

Victor had been nodding along cheerfully while Denkurou and Zank were speaking, but when Nile offered his opinion, Victor hastily grabbed his shoulders.

“Oi, oi, why would you say that? What did you come here for?!”

“I am merely a little curious regarding what sort of monkey the leader of the odious Dormентаire scum might be. If she would take you as a lover, her taste in men must be poor indeed.”

“You and I are going to have to settle this someday...” Victor’s eye was twitching, but Nile grinned fearlessly back.

“Oho. If you are suggesting that we let our fists speak for us, I would not be averse. Although I do not believe your slender arms could create an impact strong enough to affect my eardrums.”

“I saw you fight those bodyguards on the day we first met. If that was you at your best, then I’ve got a chance at winning.”

“Let me just say this: Don’t make me laugh.”

“I’ll make it so you can’t,” Victor said, falling into a semblance of a boxing stance.

Seeing him, Denkurou and Zank murmured to each other.

(“Hmm... He is not demanding gratitude from Nile for having assisted him at their first meeting. He really is a decent fellow.”)

(“Doubtless Nile does not wish to feel that he ought to be grateful for having his fight halted. That may explain why he is so belligerent with Victor, and why he persists in trying to ignore the debt he owes him.”)

Unaware of what the two were whispering about in Japanese, Victor and Nile inched closer to each other.

Denkurou and Zank made no move to intervene, apparently believing there was no need to stop them.

As the people around them were sure a fight was about to begin—
—out of the corners of their eyes, the pair saw a bright flash.

The evening sun was sinking into the western sea, but different, smaller light was growing in the area between the horizon and the port.

A sense of foreboding made all the hair on Victor's body stand on end. He turned around, the muscles from his neck to his back taut and trembling.

At almost the same moment, a few seconds after the flash, a noise shook the port.

An explosion.

It was a sound he'd become far too familiar with over the past two weeks. And the same view he'd seen in town was unfolding over the ocean.

A ship was rapidly going up in flames—the very one Victor had been cheerfully telling Denkurou's group about mere moments before, the one that had sent the fragrance of peaches to them on the sea wind: the House of Dormентаire's private vessel.

“.....Uh?”

At first, Victor didn't understand what had happened.

A second later, he did understand, but his heart wouldn't accept the knowledge.

A second after that—Victor launched himself into a sprint with the force of a carnivore hunting its prey and leaped onto the deck of a small ship that was tied up nearby.

The crew was watching the explosion, stunned.

“Get this ship out there!” he barked at them.

This wasn't a Dormентаire ship; it seemed to be some merchant's trading vessel. Even under these circumstances, he'd instantly picked

out the ship that looked as if it would be able to leave port the fastest and jumped aboard with no thought for the consequences.

The sailors were unsure how to react, but then Victor drew his gun. “Hurry, just sail us over there!” he shouted, half begging and half threatening. “Please, get this ship underway! We can still—”

He looked back out to sea.

As he did, a second explosion broke the ship into pieces, sending smoke and flames across the water.

“_____”

He couldn’t even scream.

The same was true for the other Dormентаire personnel at the port. Carla, who had been hastily trying to get one of the Dormентаire ships underway, dropped to her knees on the deck as the color drained from her face.

The calamity was all too sudden.

Everyone had known the state the town was in. Once their mistress reached port, the Dormentaires had planned to protect her from every sort of attack. Carla had even anticipated an attack from the port and had watched every ship with the eyes of a hawk, refusing to let any of them set sail until Lucrezia’s vessel arrived.

Once the ship was a little closer, they’d been planning to send a few of their vessels out to act as an escort and guard against artillery fire from shore—but the explosion had happened at the worst possible time, just before they were ready.

They hadn’t anticipated hostile action while the ship was so far from shore, and there had been no ships nearby. They had let their guard down completely—and the explosion had caught them entirely unawares.

Had it been an accident aboard the ship or an intentional attack? They had no way of knowing, and panic swept over the port. But most of the witnesses did understand one thing:

An explosion like that probably hadn't left any survivors.

While most people were despairing over that reality—Zank was straining his eyes to see.

"Beyond the smoke..." he quietly said to Denkurou. "Do you see something?"

Denkurou and Nile looked past the hulk of the bombed-out ship. And right between the sea and the sky...their eyes found a minuscule dot on the horizon.

There was another ship.

It was hard to think that the ship was close enough to have attacked a Dormентаire private vessel. But the timing was too perfect to ignore.

On that thought, Denkurou strained to identify the ship.

After a little time had passed, he began to suspect he would not like what he discovered.

A few seconds later, Zank, whose eyes were far better than Denkurou's, made it clear that he was right to be worried. His stern face grew even more severe as he murmured in a low voice.

"...It matches the description we were given.

"I believe...that is the *Advena Avis*."

Interlude—Victor Talbot's Report (Excerpt) III

*(Museum director's note: This seems to have been written the day before the ship belonging to the Dormентаire noble sank.)

I hear your ship's coming in tomorrow.

It's been a long time, and I'm looking forward to seeing you. In fact, I'm not sure writing this report won't be a waste of time, but I doubt I'll be able to see you or talk to you in person for some time.

You've brought a crowd of your attendants along, haven't you? I might be waiting months before the next time you call me to your bed.

I know you always read my reports, at least. This is almost easier for correspondence.

I know it doesn't much seem like a report; forgive me, would you?

(Omitted)

I got a list of the alchemists who are sailing on the Advena Avis. Who knows where that spy gets his information. Apparently, he's got one hell of a network.

He seems very friendly with the people here. Under the circumstances, I was surprised he could do any spying at all. It's difficult to tell what's going on in his mind, and I can't quite read him all the way down. We should be a little wary around him, I think. Or maybe I'm thinking too much about it.

About the names on that list... Maiza Avaro is a nobleman's oldest son. I may have written about him a few times in reports, but, ah...from what I hear, he was Jean-Pierre Accardo's good friend. Accardo himself seems to have run off.

You know who Accardo is: He's the one who wrote that script based on your family. Carla was watching him like a hawk, but he left Lotto Valentino before she could nab him.

Personally, I'm a little suspicious of him. From what I've heard, he seems to know quite a few things that happened here.

[] was friendly with Accardo, too, and he says the poet was extremely shrewd. He always got his information from some unknown source hiding in the shadows of this town. The spy said he was an important source of information...including information about the Dormentaires.

He may be connected to this incident, too. After all, this is like what happened last year, only worse.

(Omitted)

The passenger list for the Advena Avis is impressive. Near the end of that list, there were three people I recently got to know. They're a good-natured lot, so I'll keep an eye out for a chance to introduce you. Oh, except for the one named Nile. He's got a hell of a temper, so I'd rather not let you meet each other.

There are other passengers from several different workshops, including studios in Northern Europe and the Middle East as well... Meaning they came all the way from there to here.

Still... Something's strange about this. I can't really tell what they're planning to do once they get to America. It's almost as if their goal is just to be on the ship itself. Maybe they're planning to do something on board.

If they want to perform some sort of secret experiment that they absolutely don't want others to see, a boat out on the Atlantic would be the perfect spot for it. Although I've got no idea what that experiment might be.

Maybe they're gathering together to unveil the philosopher's stone... No, that's ridiculous.

(Omitted)

Well, that's enough of that. I'm looking forward to seeing you in person tomorrow.

I'll bet you'll see this letter before you see me.

Yours alone,

Victor Talbot



FINAL CHAPTER

DON'T LAUGH

FINAL CHAPTER: DON'T LAUGH

Somewhere in Lotto Valentino

Once, here in Lotto Valentino, the girl named Niki had lost part of her life against her will.

In the same town, she'd fallen in love with a man. It didn't matter whether her affections were accepted or not.

She was capable of loving someone—just acknowledging that one simple fact would change something about her, she felt.

Had she managed to change, ultimately?

Had she grown stronger?

Have I found the right place to die?

In the depths of a dark, dark passage, with nowhere left to go, aware of the countless murderous intents bearing down on her—the girl behind the mask wondered about these things.

The answer to her question didn't present itself.

Even so, she was satisfied.

Whatever she was, it didn't matter now.

She was just happy she'd been able to form a connection with someone.

She continued to think.

I wonder if Monica felt this way, too... I wonder if she felt connected to Huey.

Elmer had told her how her friend, her benefactor, had died.

I wonder if that's why she was able to die smiling.

I wonder if I'll be able to die smiling now.



Noon on a certain day A Mask Maker safe house

Let's return to a few days earlier.

It had been nearly five days since the House of Dormентаire's private ship sank below the waves. The chaos in Lotto Valentino was worse than it had ever been, and rioting threatened to break out at any moment.

The explosion of a ship carrying Lucrezia de Dormентаire had shaken the town to its core. After all, an influential member of one of Spain's greatest noble families had been sunk when she'd all but reached the port.

Victor had insisted that she had to still be alive, taken a boat out, and desperately searched for her—but he had found no survivors.

What would the consequences be?

The previous year, the envoy who had come to investigate had been attacked, including their ship, but the ugliness of that situation was nothing compared to this. This time, an aristocrat with authority in the House of Dormентаire had been attacked and killed directly.

It wasn't actually clear whether this was an accident or an attack by persons unknown, but the suggestion that it had been accidental would satisfy no one after the recent events in town. For an outsider from the House of Dormентаire, this was doubly true.

If word of this reached Spain, the town might be attacked and brought down in earnest.

Would they use the War of the Spanish Succession as an excuse, fabricate a story about enemy influence, and raze Lotto Valentino to the ground? After all, this was an important town for alchemists, to be sure, but it was only a provincial port in political terms.

Everyone, from aristocrats to commoners, was scared out of their wits, imagining an armed fleet of Dormентаire ships sailing over the horizon at any moment to bombard the town.

Meanwhile, the Dormентаire troops stationed in town began to wonder who would take the blame for this incident, worried it might be them.

The citizens, the Dormентаire men, and the aristocrats were all bested by an indescribable anxiety, and they grew neurotically suspicious of one another.

Ultimately, many people were wondering the same things:

Who was the culprit?

Who was the bomber—the Mask Maker?

Who could they sacrifice in order to save themselves?

The hooligans who had become Mask Makers a year ago, who had planned to take advantage of these incidents to attack the Dormentaires, were all in hiding now.

Amid the turmoil, a certain thought was taking root in the minds of Lotto Valentino's people, although it wasn't clear who'd had it first.

It doesn't matter if they're not the real culprit.

And when they arrived at this forbidden idea, they began searching not for a criminal, but for a sacrifice.

The House of Dormентаire, the aristocrats, and the common people had all been glaring at one another, but finally, their hostility turned in the same direction—toward the people they'd been suspicious of all along, the people who were engaged in a certain trade.

The alchemists.

They were the foundation of Lotto Valentino's history and the representatives of the town itself.

The alchemists themselves didn't think they were omnipotent, but most of the locals mistakenly believed their techniques were all-powerful.

Or perhaps it would be better to say they wanted it to be so, in order to make the alchemists into the culprits. *"They have to be all-powerful; that's why they were able to blow up a ship that was so far away."*

And there was one more thing—1705.

The townspeople who had been using slaves and selling the drug had once tried to pin their crimes on the alchemists of the Third Library, but they had been neatly beaten at their own game, while the production and distribution systems for the drug had been destroyed. They had not forgotten that time, and their lingering resentment spurred them into action.

Indirectly, the townspeople informed the Dormentaires: *"The Mask Makers are definitely the alchemists."*

The House of Dormentaire was deceived: *"No one but an alchemist could have been responsible for an explosion like that."*

The aristocrats not only tacitly agreed, but they actively encouraged that line of thought: *"If we sacrifice the alchemists, we may be saved."*

Esperanza, who had a connection to the Third Library, and some of the other nobles who'd supported the alchemists tried to stop this course of events.

However, *when the head of the House of Avaro, one of the town's influential nobles, summarily cut his ties with the Meyer family's workshop*, the attack on the alchemists accelerated.

Perhaps sensing the insanity in the air, Huey Laforet, who'd been hiding in the cellar under a certain abandoned building, smiled thinly.

"How familiar..."

Despite his smile, there was a hint of darkness in his voice. But that darkness was easily canceled out by the glittering light in the rest of the room.

The space was brimming over with gold. A massive amount of gold coins and jewels covered the shelves and the table. Elsewhere, there were sculptures, mantle clocks, and a variety of luxury items, all of which were clearly valuable. The scintillating light was reminiscent of the inside of a notorious pirate's chest, as if the room itself were the treasure.

...With the caveat that most of the gold coins were false ones.

Surrounded by counterfeit light, Huey went on.

"It reminds me so much of back then."

"It really does bring back memories, doesn't it?"

Although he'd seemed to be murmuring to himself, he got a sudden response.

"It reminds me of the time the two of us and Moni-Moni were plotting in here."

However, Huey didn't seem particularly surprised. As he answered, he smiled a little. "Hello, Elmer. It's been a long time."

"It sure has... What a strange smile."

"Is it?"

"It's fake but also real. At first, I thought it was completely false, but faking a smile when nobody's around is kind of odd."

It was the first time they'd seen each other in a year. Not only that, but one of them was the prime suspect in the bombings.

And yet Elmer spoke to his friend as if they'd only been apart for three days.

Huey answered Elmer impassively as well, without seeming to find anything odd about his behavior.

"If you say it's fake, then I suppose it is." Even as he affirmed Elmer's remark, Huey slowly gave his own opinion. "However, you could also consider this my neutral expression."

"I see! That makes sense!" Nodding easily, Elmer changed the subject, not wanting to pursue the issue any further. "By the way, where have you been all this time?"

"Here and there. Over the past year, I've been to all sorts of places."

"Were any of them entertaining? Would they make somebody smile?"

"I couldn't say. We have different perspectives, you and I." Huey fell to thinking, and Elmer asked him another question.

"Why were you going so many places to begin with?"

"I wanted to see the possibilities of the world outside Lotto Valentino. All I learned is that a single year is far too short a time to understand them all."

"I see. I wonder if two years would've been enough."

"It wouldn't."

"Did you bring back anything for me?"

"Plenty, if you'll settle for travel stories. I'll tell them to you someday."

"Start with the funny ones."

It was a casual chat between friends. Considering their respective positions, it was an unusual conversation, but the pair themselves didn't seem to find anything odd about it.

Then, just as casually as before, Elmer asked about a certain rather important issue.

"Oh, I almost forgot. They suspect you of those bombings, by the way. Is it you?"

The question was extremely candid.

However, Huey wasn't the least bit flustered, and he responded with a question of his own.

"What do you think? Do you suspect me?"

"Oh, you know I'm asking because I don't know. And I don't really care which it is. If you say you're the culprit, I'll think about how I can get you, the Dormentaires, and everyone else in town to smile. We could make the town famous for fires and bombings and use them to attract sightseers, say..."

This wasn't an ill-considered joke or anything of the sort; Elmer was genuinely contemplating it.

"Oh, wait a second. Even if you are the culprit, Huey, you might not be doing it because you want to smile. If someone is threatening you, we'll have to get that figured out... Well, back to the main topic: Are you the culprit?"

Looking at his friend, Huey gave a flat little chuckle. "You really don't change, do you?"

When Elmer saw his reaction, he got a little more excited. "Oh, I saw a hint of a real smile, although I don't know why it was there."

"Well, right now, it doesn't matter whether I'm the culprit or not."

“Really? Ah, never mind that, then.” Elmer easily dropped the matter, and Huey asked him a question.

“The townspeople are trying to get rid of the alchemists now, aren’t they?”

“Oh, it’s been madness. Everyone from the Third Library’s already left town, through the underground waterways or the catacombs at the church. All those trips through the dark and back again were exhausting, but it really felt worthwhile. After all, when we got to safety, everyone smiled with so much joy and relief.”

At that point, Elmer’s smile faded a little, and he sounded disappointed as he murmured, “Only there was a girl who cried and said she hadn’t wanted to leave town, and others who were angrily asking, ‘Why us?’ Still, even those people will get to survive and come back here someday. Maybe they’ll smile and enjoy themselves then... So I’d like to think that what I did wasn’t a waste.”

As Elmer nodded to himself, Huey asked another question.

“You’re not going to leave?”

It was a perfectly natural thing to ask, and Elmer answered it nonchalantly.

“Well, it’s not like I’ve gotten everybody else out yet. Besides, you’re not running, either, Huey.”

“Even if this town is annihilated, you might just stay behind to see the last person smile.”

“Are you planning to end up being that ‘last person’?”

“...Perhaps I would have, in the past. This time, I don’t know...,” Huey murmured, more to himself than to Elmer, as he took one of the false coins off a shelf with his fingertips.

“This time?”

“Oh yes, that’s right. I forgot to correct you.” His smile turned false again as he spoke calmly. “A minute ago, I was reminiscing, but not about you and Monica.”

“?”

“My mother was killed in a witch trial. She accused the other villagers before she died, and shortly after, they were burned at the stake. It’s the story Jean-Pierre Accardo turned into a play.”

Like Elmer, Huey spoke easily about a part of his history he’d once tried to avoid.

Elmer noticed the change in his friend, but he said nothing and only listened.

“When I said it reminded me of ‘back then’...I was speaking of the village. The emotion in the air is the same.”

“Are you planning to burn the whole town at the stake?” The question struck straight to the heart of the issue in a way, and Huey’s smile turned a little genuine again.

“Of course not. I wasn’t the one who burned the villagers back then, either. They might as well have jumped into the flames themselves.” As Huey coolly analyzed his past, he rolled the false gold coin around on his palm, studying it. “I don’t bear a grudge against the world any longer,” he murmured, as if reminding himself of the fact.

“You don’t? That’s great. If that’s how you feel, I bet it’ll be easier to smile for lots of reasons.”

“However, I don’t have so much love for it that I would smile so easily.”

“Aww! Come on, at least try. Don’t give up.” Elmer looked extremely disappointed.

As he nodded in agreement, Huey continued. “When I first met you six years ago, I hated the world with a passion. Then Monica changed

me, and I loved the world because she was in it. Now, neither is true.” He flipped the coin into the air, caught it on his palm, and tossed it away into a corner, without checking to see whether it had landed heads or tails. “I no longer have any hatred for this world, nor any attachment to it. All of it, myself included, is only here to help me achieve my goal. Like a guinea pig for an experiment.”

“Your goal? Is that the one about keeping your promise to Monica?”

Huey didn’t respond to that question at all.

However, the silence itself was enough of an answer for Elmer, and he didn’t pursue the matter any further.

For a little while, silence fell over the glittering room of false riches.

When several minutes had passed, Huey closed his eyes and slowly began to speak. “Elmer, I have two favors to ask you.”

The smile he wore was the same peculiar, fake one.

However, when Elmer heard his voice, he was convinced.

Oh. I thought he seemed completely different somehow, but...I have a feeling there’s just a little of the old Huey left.

No matter who Elmer was with, he wanted them to smile with the same intensity.

In that moment, though, when he knew for sure that Huey wasn’t a completely different person, it made him a little happy.

After all, if Huey were someone else entirely, the kind of smile he used to make before would be gone forever. Even Elmer would have felt a little sad at that.

With that thought in mind, Elmer needed to know one thing.

“If I agree to your conditions...”

Huey already knew exactly what Elmer wanted, so he answered before he’d finished.

“I may not be able to smile right away. However, once I achieve my goal...I’ll keep my promise from a year ago.”

The promise from a year ago.

“Would saving Monica make you happy?”

“...Of course it would.”

“If you get to see Monica again, will you smile?”

Back then, Huey had made Elmer a firm promise.

“I’ll show you the greatest smile you’ve ever seen.”

Remembering that conversation, Elmer was sure—he knew what it was that Huey wanted.

Elmer didn’t know the details, but—*Huey was definitely planning to see Monica once again.*

He didn’t know the specific method; whether he was going to study spiritualism, or wait until the dead could be brought back through science, or resurrect her with black magic.

Whatever it was, he was absolutely planning to make Monica’s final words a reality. *Let’s meet again, Huey.* To Monica, it might have been a farewell from the edge of death, or maybe it was a meaningless statement from her fading mind—but to Huey Laforet, it had truly been a promise.



Sensing determination that lay behind Huey's words, Elmer grinned.
"If you tell me that, you know I can't turn you down, right?"



The same day The Third Library

Libraries were supposed to be quiet spaces, but at the moment, several men were shouting angrily.

"Did you find them?!"

"Dammit... They're not here! What's going on?!"

"There were guards stationed on every route out of the village!"

"Where did the alchemists disappear to?!"

They seemed to be Dormентаire soldiers; the one with a relatively recent wound on his face was the man Nile had kicked to the ground about half a month ago.

"Damn it... Those foreign alchemists have slipped away, too!"

"Think of it this way—if they fled, we can say they were responsible."

"You imbecile! If they think we let them all get away, we're done for!"

"One of the aristocrats could be hiding them. They say the Third Library has ties to the family of Lord Boroñal."

The House of Dormентаire had been indiscriminately trying to apprehend alchemists as suspects. However, over the past few days, while they were preparing, the alchemists had vanished into thin air.

They probably didn't know that this town had originally been built for alchemists.

Wary of persecution and plunder, they'd established scores of escape routes, not over days or even years, but over essentially its entire history.

"They have to be hiding somewhere... Oh, just burn it all! Smoke them out!" the soldier with the scarred face screamed in exasperation.

It was a radical remark, and most of the soldiers looked at each other with frowns—but their failure thus far had increased the pressure on them. No one voiced a clear objection.

...Except for one: the leader of the Dormентаire envoy, who had come to the Third Library as well.

"Don't."

"Huh?! ...C-Carla, ma'am."

"There's no sense in setting it on fire. Don't do anything rash," Carla said evenly, and for a moment, the soldier with the scarred face almost flinched, but—

"If only we could all be so soft, my lady captain."

For ages, he'd resented being required to answer to a woman, and the extreme stress and frustration brought that grievance to the surface.

"...What?"

"You're very kind. I suppose a woman really does have a softer touch."

"....."

Carla's silence only emboldened the scarred soldier.

She would probably lose her position over this disaster—meaning he didn't have to watch his words around this woman any longer.

On that thought, he decided to seize his chance and really let her have it.

“Don’t we serve the Dormentaires?! You should be willing to burn a city if it means hunting those damned alchemists! ...Oh, I’m so very sorry, my lady, did you find yourself a *beau* among the alchemists? He’szbwau...?”

That was as much as he managed to say before Carla had shoved her hand into the man’s mouth, grabbed his lower jaw and cheek, and dashed him to the ground.

The corners of the man’s lips split, and blood flooded his mouth.

The pain instantly cooled his head down, and he understood that he’d said something he should not have said.

“Eep... Eeagh... I, I’m very so...gblagh?!”

As he shrieked and tried to apologize, Carla’s armored heel jammed itself into the fallen man’s mouth, breaking several teeth.

“You seem to misunderstand my motivations, so allow me to make myself clear.”

Carla’s voice was still calm, but she was leaning more weight onto her heel.

“...—...! Buh..... Abuh! ...!”

“I have no doubts that this town will belong to the House of Dormentaire in the end, because that is what Lady Lucrezia wanted. The spoils of Lotto Valentino will belong to her one day. Whether she’s among the living then or not is beside the point.”

Keeping her emotions tightly under control, Carla continued burying her boot deeper and deeper into the man’s face.

“No one has the right to burn books and documents that will belong to Lady Lucrezia. Not you, and not I.”

The man's scar had disappeared into this new wound. After making sure he'd passed out completely, Carla slowly withdrew her foot—and issued an order to the men who stood frozen behind her.

“Take him to the fortress's infirmary.”

Then, after she'd watched the soldiers begin carrying their scarred comrade to the maritime fortress—she looked up at the library building, thinking of Maiza.

“If you're able to flee the town, by all means, do it,” she said quietly.

“However... Don't even think about trying to put out to sea on the *Advena Avis*.”



Several days later Under the Third Library

In this era, the concept of public graveyards wasn't yet common.

The dead were buried in churchyards, but of course, space was limited. When it became an issue, many churches would dig up corpses that had skeletonized and reinter their bones in the cellar of the church building.

Some cities used preexisting underground waterways, and Lotto Valentino was one of them.

While they weren't as vast as the mining galleries under Paris, or the underground river channels that would be built in London several decades later, this town had several underground tunnels for clean and waste water.

The town only had one church for all its dead, and it lay on the outskirts, so there was naturally no way the churchyard could accommodate all of them.

The waterways under the streets had been expanded into an ossuary, creating another face below.

However, the number of people who knew the layout of the underground structures was very limited, perhaps due to a secret pact of some sort. No one but the alchemists and those affiliated with the church knew the full shape of these subterranean areas.

In one of the underground tunnels, more than twenty men were assembled.

Most of them belonged to the many local alchemy workshops, but quite a few, like Denkurou's group, had come from farther afield.

("Who'd ever have thought this would happen...?")

The alchemists were whispering to each other.

("I agreed to go to the New World, but we'll never even leave port like this.")

("Shouldn't we just flee the town as well?")

These were just a few of the things they were saying, but—

"You may. Prioritizing your own safety is certainly not the wrong choice," Dalton interjected, fiddling with his prosthetic right hand and making it click. When they heard his voice, all eyes turned to him.

While Dalton wasn't scheduled to be a passenger on the *Advena Avis*, he was the one who had drawn the ship to this town.

The alchemists spoke to him uneasily.

"You call it a choice, Dalton, but do we have any other options?" one of the alchemists asked. "The House of Dormентаire placed the *Advena Avis* under guard the moment she arrived in port. Even the crew were employed for the trip here only."

"Y-yes, he's right. No sailors would defy the Dormentaires and let us hire them now."

"Are you telling us to cross the Atlantic by ourselves...?"

“I don’t know how to sail a ship.”

As a stir ran through the alchemists, Dalton responded without emotion. “I’m sure you are uneasy, but when Columbus crossed the Atlantic, he did so with three ships and around a hundred men—in other words, roughly thirty men to sail each ship.”

Then Dalton’s eyes went to Denkurou’s group, in a corner of the room.

“Majida Battuta has also sent three members of her drifting workshop as sailors.”

The alchemists reacted strongly to the name.

“Battuta’s drifting workshop?! You have connections to her as well?! Th-then you mean to say that the Asian and African fellows are members of the drifting workshop?!”

“I didn’t think it actually existed...”

“I’d heard rumors that she worked with traders of her acquaintance to prevent the drug and the false gold from spreading overseas from here. Was that true?”

Majida Battuta was treated as a figure of legend among her fellow alchemists. Her workshop was a fleet of her own private ships, and people said she conducted original research while drifting across the world’s oceans.

Thanks to her name, she was rumored to be from somewhere in the Arab world, but almost no one had ever seen her, so there were doubts as to whether she really existed at all.

As Denkurou and the others listened to the commotion, they murmured to each other, one eyebrow quirked quizzically.

“Hmm... They seem to consider our master a mythical being, like a mage or dragon.”

“She certainly is a hero worthy of our selfless devotion, but...”

“Let me just say this: Our master is not so impressive that she warrants such statements, though I do feel indebted to her.”

Denkurou and Zank had been picked up by her fleet directly, while Nile had been entrusted to her by an alchemist and adventurer who was an old friend of hers.

Their current orders from Majida were to help the alchemists who were leaving Lotto Valentino for America.

The three of them would teach the basics of sailing and navigating to the other alchemists as they voyaged. While it was a fairly risky endeavor, they were scheduled to receive provisions, fresh water, and other support from companions from the fleet in their scheduled ports of call. In addition, if they were alerted to danger, escort ships would accompany them for certain legs of their journey.

As a result, their ship would actually be sailing alone only from Lotto Valentino to its first port of call, and from its final port of call to America.

Unfortunately, leaving Lotto Valentino was shaping up to be the hardest part of the journey.

Standing among the alchemists from all over, Maiza asked Dalton a direct question.

“Can we afford to risk it? Won’t they bombard the *Advena Avis* itself and sink it?”

“Officially, the *Advena Avis* is the Mars Clan’s private ship. Even the Dormентаire lot can’t seize or sink it arbitrarily. Things might be different in peacetime, but thanks to the War of the Spanish Succession, it would cause nothing but unnecessary trouble.”

The Mars Clan was a family of influential Western European nobles that rivaled the House of Dormентаire.

“What’s the connection?”

“Oh, they’re just old friends of mine. You could say their very business is financing. That ship is their offer of support to alchemists who are expected to change the future in a very particular way.”

The mention of support from a power to rival the Dormentaires was a source of relief for the alchemists, but Dalton warned them firmly not to relax too much.

“That said, I doubt the Dormentaires have any intention of allowing you to leave port. They may fabricate a story about criminals fleeing on a ship they stole from the Mars Clan. If they do, I wouldn’t count on protection from the clan. The only help they provided was sending that ship here; they don’t want to borrow trouble, either.”

Maiza was tense. “I see...”

Dalton broke into a dauntless smile. “If this trial proves to be too much for you, you are not worthy of conducting that experiment on the ship.”

Even as a commotion ran through them, the alchemists continued listening to Dalton’s explanation. Meanwhile, Czeslaw Meyer was anxious for completely different reasons. He clutched the coattail of the man who stood beside him.

“Um, Fermet? How long do we have to stay here?”

“Don’t worry, Czes. We’ll be able to go outside soon.”

“I-if you say so...”

After a little while, Maiza left the group of alchemists, who were still asking Dalton questions, and came over to the pair.

“Are you all right, Czes?” he asked.

“...I’m scared, Maiza. What’s going to happen to us?”

“There’s nothing to worry about.” Maiza gently patted Czes’s head.

Gretto and Sylvie had been standing a short distance away, but when they saw him, they walked over.

“Czes, don’t be afraid. I’m frightened, too, but we’re all here.”

“Oh, umm...Sylvie.”

“They’ve brought some fruit over there; come and have some with me?” Sylvie smiled at him kindly.

Czes glanced at Fermet.

“Take care not to eat too much, Czes,” Fermet said.

“I will!” Nodding happily, Czes went off with Sylvie.

After making sure they were too far away to hear, Gretto hung his head sadly. “I can’t believe even the Meyer boy would have to flee...”

The man behind Fermet heard Gretto’s remark and snapped back, “It’s all because I made that drug. Damn him, that festering sausage!”

Begg Garrott, a Meyer family alchemist, had once created the original form of the drug.

The “festering sausage” was probably Maiza’s father, the head of the House of Avaro and the one who had had Begg make the drug, thus creating one of the causes behind this chaos. Now, he had taken advantage of this incident to silence him and the rest of the Meyer family.

“Begg! Maiza and Gretto are right here!”

“...That’s true. I apologize for insulting your family, I’m the one to blame... I’m...s-s-sorry,” Begg apologized, his tongue stalling partway through.

Maiza shook his head calmly. “It’s fine. In fact, please let me apologize in my father’s place.”

Gretto looked away. "He's right, you know," he muttered. "'Festering sausage' is still too good for that bastard."

"...Gretto?"

Noticing the darkness in his brother's eyes, Maiza leaned in to take a closer look at his face, worried.

Maiza had been against Gretto and Sylvie eloping on the *Advena Avis*. However, he felt guilty about leaving them at home; he hadn't known anything about what his father had done to them. It kept him from being too insistent.

When they were arguing earlier, Dalton had come along and lent a hand to Maiza. *You only need to train your younger brother and Sylvie as alchemists on the ship. I'll put them down on the register as your assistants.*

And now they were underground, watching for an opportunity to sail.

Maiza had considered having them leave the ship at their first port of call, but the hatred in his brother's voice had been very close to murderous. He was getting worried.

However, it was Fermet who rebuked Gretto.

"You shouldn't speak ill of your father in front of strangers."

"Fermet..."

"I understand why you would resent him. If someone had torn me from the one I loved, I'm sure I would wish death on that person as well. Family are the first others you ever meet, but those bonds persist until the very end. Harboring a constant hatred for your family will only break you."

Fermet lectured him gently, as if Gretto were his own brother.

“However, I’m not attempting to stop you and Sylvie. Some hatreds will only subside with distance.”

“.....”

“Someday, when you’ve built a happy home with Sylvie...you should send him a letter. He might still change.”

“...Thank you very much. I feel...a little better.”

Maiza was relieved to see that the dark flames in Gretto’s eyes had faded slightly. He was sincerely grateful. “Thank you, Fermet. As a member of the House of Avaro, I was expecting you to resent me.”

Watching the head of the Meyer family eating fruit in the back of the room, Fermet smiled. “No. I simply don’t want to bring Czes into contact with the hatred and sorrow of being human just yet.” With that, he slowly started for the door that led aboveground. “Now then, I’m off to make final preparations of my own. I intend to be as cautious as possible, but if an opportunity to board the ship arises before I return...please take care of Czes.”

“You’re sending the workshop staff out of town?”

“Yes, my relative’s child has been left in the care of someone trustworthy, but the apprentices will be recognized as alchemists, and I have to get them safely away. Ordinarily, I would have preferred to send Czes to a nearby town with them...,” he said regretfully.

Begg grinned at him. “You’re the only one Czes has gotten attached to, Fermet. If you’re going to America...of course...he’ll...fol...low...you...there. You’re almost like a real father and son, or brothers.”

As his studio colleague teased him, Fermet replied with a warm smile.

“I am happy you think so, but my feelings about that are rather complicated.

“I could hardly be a father or brother to Czes. I’m not a saint.”

Maiza and the others believed he was being humble.

...But they didn’t know.

There hadn’t been one single lie in what Fermet said.

He was far from a saint.



Two hours later An office in the Avaro residence

Evening had come, and the pall of night had fallen over the Avaro mansion and the rest of the town.

“Dammit... What’s going on here?!”

After a servant had delivered a certain report and left the room, the head of the House of Avaro slammed a fist into his desk.

“That boy of mine—he’s lost his mind. And the Meyers, too! How could they forget their debt to me and betray me like this?!”

Ordinarily, he would have only grumbled to himself, but he was so furious he had begun shouting aloud. He didn’t care how much the servants overheard, and he imprudently vented his rage at the empty room at the top of his lungs.

However—unbeknownst to him, someone else had been listening.

An individual who’d entered the room responded to the would-be soliloquy.

“What a cruel thing to say. It was you who first betrayed us, Lord Avaro.”

“?!”

When he hastily turned toward the voice—he saw a masked man, standing by the window. The man wasn't wearing a cloak or a hood, however, and he didn't seem to care that much about hiding his identity.

As proof, he promptly removed the mask, exposing his face to the House of Avaro head.

“Heh-heh. Did you think I was a Mask Maker? Convenient, isn't it? This mask could be found anywhere, and yet simply by putting it on, I can convince others that I am a member.”

The man's lips were smiling, but his eyes were hidden by his thick bangs; it was impossible to read what was in his heart. In a way, the man had removed the mask only to reveal another mask.

The House of Avaro head hissed venomously back at him:

“Lebreau Fermet Viralesque... You wretch... What is the meaning of this?!”



Meanwhile Somewhere in Lotto Valentino

Hearing the tick of a clock, Szilard slowly raised his head.

“...Right on time,” he said with some disgust.

A figure had appeared just as the clock struck, wearing a hooded cloak and a distinctive mask.

“I've wondered for some time now: Is there any meaning in wearing that in my presence?” Szilard got to his feet and went on, keeping his guard up. “Well then, I suppose we should go...” Szilard was about to say his name, but he paused for an uncertain moment, then finally asked directly:

“Would it be more convenient if I called you Mask Maker at this point?”



The Boroñal residence

“You’re going?” Esperanza asked.

The young man smiled. “Suppose so.”

“I’ve heard about this from Dalton... I am extraordinarily skeptical about what you people intend to do on that ship, and due to my position, I can’t help you leave port.”

“Don’t you worry. Even if it puts you under the Dormentaires’ thumb, protecting the town until the very end is your job, Speran. Just do what you think is most likely to make you smile. If you smile, I bet all your maids will, too.”

“Oh, that’s right. Speaking of maids, give this to Miss Sylvie, would you?” With that, Esperanza held out a purse with several gold coins in it. “It’s her wages.”

“...Speran, how much did you know about Sylvie?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

The lord’s clown-like face was studiously expressionless, and Elmer seemed amused by this.

“Well, I’m off. I hope we get to meet at least once more while we’re still alive.”

“You’re awfully blasé about all of this. Quite unlike a man who’s going all the way to America.”

“Well, I hate long good-byes. It’s hard to smile when everyone acts so gloomy.” The response was very like Elmer.

After a moment’s pause, the lord spoke. “Would you do me one favor?”

“What?”

“I know the dead don’t interest you. However...even if it’s only you and Huey Laforet...”

“I know.”

Elmer gave a small nod, then finished the lord’s sentence.

“I’ll never forget Monica as long as I live...and neither will Huey.”

“All right... Thank you. I owe you a sizable debt now.”

“You don’t have to pay it back to me. Just do what you can as a lord to help the townspeople smile.”

Starting toward the front gate, the young smile junkie waved lightly at his friend and told him good-bye.

“The mess in town should end after the *baccano* today.”

With ominous words and a breezy smile, Elmer took his leave.



The Avaro residence

“‘What is the meaning of this,’ you ask? I’m afraid I don’t understand. To what exactly do you refer?” Fermet responded calmly, his attitude courteous.

Lord Avaro ground his teeth together audibly, but he did not call for anyone.

He assumed that if the man had gone to the trouble of coming here, he must have had some reason for it. Until he knew what that was, it was probably better not to meddle with him.

Still, his mind was on the single-shot pistol in his drawer. If Fermet made any suspicious moves, he’d be able to grab it and fire.

Although he knew he had the advantage, he was still more angry than composed.

“You scoundrel... Where have you taken Gretto?”

“I don’t know what you mean. I haven’t done anything to him. You tore the lovers asunder, and he simply ran off on his own. Right now, the lovebirds may be drinking poison, fancying themselves Romeo and Juliet. Romantic, don’t you think?”

“Wha...?”

“You really are the scum of the earth, aren’t you? Not only did you sabotage your son’s romance, but you sold his beloved off to that lecherous lord. It’s hard to believe you are even human.”

The alchemist wore a fearless smile, and the lord of the Avaro house was livid.

“Don’t mock me! *You were the one who informed me of Gretto and Sylvie’s relationship!*”

“Indeed. What of it?”

“Wha—?”

“Oh dear. You *are* his father, after all; I thought you would see that your son was serious and support him. I never dreamed you’d do something so awful. Apparently, I am a poor judge of character. What a shame.” Fermet spoke brazenly, shaking his head.

“What does scum like you...know of aristocrats...?”

“My, my. You seem to believe you are worthy to speak on behalf of the nobility, even though the resources you hold are worth less than a single one of the Dormentaires’ summer villas. I envy your optimistic view of the world.”

“You...!”

Fermet was the very picture of hypocritical courtesy.

The family head had noticed—this man was acting like a completely different person than he did on his regular visits to the mansion with

Begg and the others. He also realized this was most likely Fermet's true nature.

"Why, you..."

"And your cruelty toward your son may cost you the rank you already hold."

"...? What do you mean?!"

"After you persisted in rejecting everything your son was...he capitalized on the recent events." His smile warping with utter joy, he shared the facts. "The terrorist bombings targeted only Dormентаire facilities. However, after a certain point, the arson attempts spread to the mansions of aristocrats as well. Had you noticed? The noble mansions that caught fire...were all within a certain distance of this one."

"You can't...mean...", the man stammered.

With no hesitation, Fermet said the brutal truth.

"Your son Gretto was attempting to pull the aristocrats into the war between the Dormentaires and the Mask Makers. His world as a noble had left him trapped, so he planned to destroy it.

"To that end...he pretended to be a Mask Maker and committed arson."



Several days previously Gretto's room

A wind blew into the room, and Gretto flinched, shivering.

"...Wh-who's there?!"

When he turned around, he saw a hazy shape in the light from the window, the only light in the room.

Gretto's lips were quivering with panic. The phantom wore a hooded cloak and a white mask, glinting in the moonlight.

"Please don't worry. I am Sylvie's ally."

"Huh...?"

The *feminine* voice had startled him, too, but when the masked phantom said Sylvie's name, Gretto swallowed his scream.

"Let's not waste time. For the past several days, you've been setting nearby mansions on fire, haven't you?"

"!! What...are you...?"

"I don't know whether you bribed one of the servants guarding you, or if you snuck out of the mansion on your own, but you went into the streets at night and set fire to neighboring mansions. Because all the incidents have occurred within a certain radius of this estate, some are beginning to suspect the people who live here."

"....."

As though he believed he might be able to keep his secret if he said nothing, Gretto opened and shut his mouth a few times, silently. However, his trembling and the color of his complexion acknowledged that what the masked girl had said was true.

To set his mind at ease, she said, "Sylvie doesn't know, and I don't plan to tell her. Don't worry."

"Huh...?"

"I told you, remember? I'm Sylvie's ally. I want the two of you to be happy, so I can't let you be caught by the House of Dormентаire."

"Th-then what should I...?"

Gretto swallowed hard. He was dripping with cold sweat.

“I’ll take care of Sylvie. However, you need to make contact with Maiza, so I’ll help you reach the Third Library. We’ll also need to do away with the suspicion that you might be the culprit.”

She took an odd sphere made of pottery from her cloak, then spoke with no emotion in her voice at all.

“How far are you prepared to go...to make Sylvie your bride?”



The present The Avaro residence

“Preposterous! You’re telling me that Gretto set fire to this mansion himself?!”

“You were lucky it didn’t burn to the ground, weren’t you? Either he didn’t care whether the fire spread and killed you, or he didn’t think that far. I wonder which it was.” Fermet snickered as the head of the House of Avaro slammed a fist into his desk.

“Why arson?! If he was able to slip outside, he could just have gone to have a tryst with his maid! If he was going to set fires, why didn’t he do it to the Boroñal mansion?!”

“He probably didn’t have the courage—or the sheer stupidity—to sneak into the lord’s mansion when he had no inside information. Besides, if he’d set fire to it, he could have killed Sylvie.”

“But what did he have to gain by setting fire to other mansions?! Just dragging us into the fight between the Dormentaires and the town wouldn’t destroy society itself!”

“Of course that’s true—to a rational mind. What he did was utterly meaningless. However, it was you who robbed him of reason, Lord Avaro,” Fermet replied, still utterly polite.

Clenching his fists so hard they began to bleed, Avaro recalled his sons' faces. "Damn it all!" he spat. "Why...? Both Maiza and Gretto... Why are they such a disappointment?!"

At that—Fermet's courteous attitude changed to open contempt.

"Disappointment?! They disappoint you, do they?!"

Avaro's eyes widened at the abrupt shift, and he grew warier.

Fermet laughed with genuine amusement before he began his refutation.

"Oh, that's amusing in several ways, Lord Avaro. Maiza is far more capable than you are. If I had to say, it is you who have continuously disappointed him, don't you think?"

"How dare—"

"And with regard to Gretto...I must laugh for the opposite reason." A spiteful edge crept into Fermet's smile, an expression he ordinarily never showed anyone, as he cheerfully continued reviling the man.

"Do you mean to say you expected anything at all from that *half-wit*? You sincerely believed he was capable of more? If so, you don't have the least suggestion of a hint of good judgment; you're even more of an imbecile than him. Confessing your disappointment in him is confessing your own blind foolishness, you know. Your own son called you a festering sausage, and I have to say I agree!"

Only a moment ago, Fermet had said he himself had no eye for people, but now the contempt in those words was palpable.

No longer able to tolerate Fermet's scorn, the head of the House of Avaro took the pistol from the drawer, pointed it at the intruder, and screamed. "Don't laugh... Don't laugh!"

Fermet slowly raised both hands, although his expression stayed composed. "I do beg your pardon. However, if I die, some things may come to light that you would rather have kept hidden. After all, in

addition to manufacturing drugs, you seem to have made a habit out of doing nauseating things.”

As he watched the other man, Fermet slowly moved toward the window.

“You won’t get away with this!”

Lord Avaro pulled the trigger, but all he heard was a *click*, and no bullet emerged.

“I took the liberty of removing the powder and shot before you reached the room. If you meant to use that to defend yourself, you should have kept it on your person.”

“Ghk...!”

The man tried to call for a servant, but Fermet stopped him with a warning.

“Oh, are you sure you don’t mind people learning that your son is an arsonist?”

“...! Th-that was your plot!”

“I didn’t suggest that he set any fires, you know. And you cut ties with the Meyer family yourself, so I have only to insist that the Avaros fabricated everything. If you’d like, I can even claim that this mask was discovered in your drawer,” Fermet said cheerfully.

Meanwhile, the other man’s mind raced, desperately trying to catch up with the current of events.

However, as if he was specifically trying to keep that from happening, Fermet kept speaking.

“Even my presence here can be easily explained; all I have to say is that I came to denounce you for trying to blame your crimes on the Meyer family. After this, even if you revile me, even if you outline the

truth in a letter, even if others believe it superficially for the sake of peace, I doubt anyone will genuinely trust you.”

“Then... Then why did you come here? Do you intend to blackmail me? Is it money? Or are you telling me to help you leave town?! What do I have to do to get you to protect my position?!”

Even now, he’s not worrying about his sons, hmm? Fermet thought. *He really is a fascinating little toad, isn’t he?*

As he sneered internally, Fermet gave him an honest answer. “Ah, just a detour.”

“A...detour...?”

“I actually came aboveground on other business. *I simply thought it might be fun to learn how a nobleman would react upon discovering that his own son was an arsonist.* That’s all.”

“...Huh? Er, ah?”

The House of Avaro head sounded senile; he didn’t understand what the other man was saying.

After stealing a glance at his face, Fermet continued more to himself than to the nobleman.

“It was *entertaining* to be sure, but dealing with a filthy adult such as yourself was hardly *exciting*. It’s as I thought—the adorable ones are the most satisfying to admire and to torture, especially the sweet little boys and girls who adore me. Don’t you agree?”

“.....?”

“By all means, continue to live the best life you can as the dregs of the aristocracy. Embrace your status as a festering sausage. After all, I’m sure it’s too late for you to become anything more.”

Fermet bowed deferentially, and in that moment—

—a roar echoed from the direction of the town.

“?!”

When Lord Avaro looked that way, explosions were rumbling through the streets, one after another, and flames were rising from every quarter.

“Wha...? What is...? Is this your doing as well?! Ferm...”

When he turned around, no one was there.

For a little while, the man was silent; then he slumped weakly into a chair. The vitality was draining out of him, as if he’d aged ten years in just a few minutes.

His mansion hadn’t exploded, and it wasn’t on fire again—but he knew this was checkmate for him. He might not be ruined after this. If he kept quiet, he could hold on to his noble rank.

However, he would never be anything more than what Fermet had said.

The moment he realized that—he no longer cared whether he lived or died, and he gave up thinking.

“Dammit... Damn them...”

Full of hatred against the world, he put the muzzle of the empty pistol to his temple, cocked the hammer, then pulled the trigger, over and over.

Click, click. Feeling the futility in the echoing sound, the head of the House of Avaro groaned as if he was cursing the entire world.

That said, the voice wrung from the childish emotions of this middle-aged man was too thin to be heard over the commotion in town.

Lebreau Fermet Viralesque.

While he was revealing his true nature to Lord Avaro, the disaster churning in Lotto Valentino reached its peak.

Flames and explosions rose all across the town, as if someone had planned it, inflicting such terror on the Dormентаire men, the aristocrats on the hill, and the ordinary townspeople that they believed the end was nigh.

It was as if they meant to wipe the town off the map.



The maritime fortress

Carla was in the middle of patrolling the town when the explosions erupted.

After ordering the men who were with her to give aid and put out the nearest fires, she returned to the Dormентаire envoy's headquarters on the maritime fortress.

"What is going on here?!"

She questioned the troops who'd been outside, but none of them seemed to understand the situation, either. However, as reports continued to come in from all over, the extent of the damage grew clearer and clearer.

Apparently, these bombings were occurring at locations that had already been bombed or set on fire over the past two weeks. The partially burned houses and mounds of rubble were exploding again.

Investigations were still ongoing, and the locations had been largely abandoned, which meant those initial explosions had produced almost no victims. As a matter of fact, the only injuries had come from the violence of the fleeing crowds.

Relieved that no deaths had been reported, at least for now, Carla kept on gathering information and dispatching her troops to appropriate places until she heard some noteworthy news.

“It’s him... The Mask Maker has been sighted! He’s running through the streets!”

When that report came in, Carla thought for a few seconds.

So the Mask Maker has shown himself again? If he has, he must have had a reason for doing so.

The most likely reason is...to draw our eyes. A diversion of some sort.

In that case, what was their attention being diverted from?

Soon after the question rose in her mind, she received the answer from another subordinate.

“Ma’am! A ship... The *Advena Avis* is underway!”



The *Advena Avis*

Nile spoke up. “Let me just ask this: What happened?”

“I do not know,” Denkurou answered, “but now is most definitely our chance.”

Explosions had erupted all over town, and the Dormентаire men guarding the *Advena Avis* had thinned. Dalton had been watching the situation and determined that this was probably their first and final opportunity, and so Denkurou, Zank, and Nile had boarded to seize the ship.

They knocked out the handful of remaining guards, ran up the fewest sails possible, and weighed anchor. The sails and steering apparatus of the *Advena Avis* were startlingly simple for a ship of that era, so even with a crew of three, they managed to sail the vessel easily.

Moving away from the maritime fortress, they made for a certain spot in the port.

The land routes were all blocked by flames—but that one area, the mouth of an underground waterway, would take them where they needed to go.

It was perfect. While explosions had strewn rubble around the area, there had been no explosions or fires in the part of the waterway that connected to the port.

However, if they took their time, the flames might spread there as well.

“...I do not like this,” Nile muttered.

Zank agreed. “Me neither. This fire has nothing to do with us, and yet it’s perfectly timed and placed.”

Someone was guiding them.

Denkurou was almost certain this was true, but he chose not to go against that current.

“However, there is no way to go but forward.

“If we fail to show ourselves here, the House of Dormентаire may very well use the conflagration as an excuse to raze the town.”



The port

“What...on earth...?”

After emerging from the underground waterway, Maiza was looking at the smoke rising from the fires all over town. He was stunned.

“I don’t know, but now’s our chance!”

The alchemists had spotted the *Advena Avis*, which was attempting to come alongside a nearby stretch of port.

Carrying Czes on his back, Begg called to Maiza, who had stopped just outside the hidden door that led to the underground waterway. "Maiza, let's go! This journey is meaningless without you!"

Even amid the commotion, Czes was fast asleep, breathing peacefully, and he showed no sign of waking.

"I—I know... What's the matter with Czes?"

"I put him to sleep with a drug of mine. Don't worry, it wasn't the usual one; this one has no side effects apart from the drowsiness."

"He'd really better be all right."

Despite his misgivings, Maiza sent Begg on his way. He started to follow him, until he saw that smoke was also rising from the ranks of mansions on the hill.

Should I truly be doing this? All this happening, while I attempt to escape the town...

He owed nothing to Lotto Valentino, but his inborn nature was trying to take the option of fleeing away from him.

Dalton had emerged from underground while Maiza was thinking, and he called to him from behind.

"There's no need to hesitate."

"! Maestro Dalton..."

"You told me you were prepared to discard the town...and its people, didn't you? You are the one to whom I've entrusted my knowledge. If you do not board the *Advena Avis* with the other alchemists, it will all be for nothing."

"...Yes. But..." Maiza clenched his fists.

Sighing lightly, Dalton went on. "Well, you were planning to leave the town in your brother's hands, and now he's fleeing with you. I

suppose you can't convince yourself so easily." Then he gave Maiza a little push. "We will do everything we can."

"Huh...?"

"You're well aware that you have no need to worry about our lives. If you are indeed becoming immortal in order to save something, then once you're safely immortal, put the fact that you don't die to good use and save someone else. Right now, you won't save anyone by staying here. You'll only leave the passengers of the *Advena Avis* at sea."

Maiza thought hard for a few seconds longer. Then, his fists still clenched, he nodded firmly.

"I never had any love for this town, but...please do take care of it."

"The preamble was uncalled-for. Are you trying to dampen my enthusiasm?"

Unusually for him, Dalton smiled, then handed Maiza the passenger list and a sealed letter.

"Once you've made it out of port and the chaos has abated, open that.

"Mind you, I don't know whether the contents of that envelope will prove to be good luck or ill."



"My. It appears I'm the last one."

As Dalton turned to head back underground, Fermet opened the hidden door and stepped out.

"...Did you finish your business?"

"Yes. Without mishap. I have many regrets, but I'm not such a fool that I'd busy myself with them and leave Czes all alone."

“That was clever work.”

“What do you mean?”

Fermet feigned ignorance, and Dalton went on.

“Considering your position before now, there was no reason for you to sail on the *Advena Avis*. However, under the present circumstances, escaping the town provided a perfect reason for you to board. No one will suspect a thing.”

“...If you are displeased with me, you can still strike my name from the passenger list.”

“No, no. No matter what you plan to do, I have no right to meddle. Unless you happen to be immortal already.”

Dalton glared at him, but Fermet evaded the look. “I am a perfectly ordinary human being... For now.”

“You don’t strike me as a man who would go to such lengths for immortality.”

“Ha-ha. Actually, immortality itself holds little interest for me. I want to make *someone else* immortal.”

His smile was gentle, but Dalton realized that beneath it was nothing but sheer malice.

“...Take care not to lose your footing. You won’t be the only aberration on that ship.”

However, he didn’t try to stop the man from boarding.

Noticing this, Fermet chuckled and bowed to him reverently.

“I knew it. You are both a leader and an observer.

“You are worthy of respect, Maestro Dalton.”



When Maiza ran into the port, the *Advena Avis* had already been brought alongside, and the alchemists had begun jumping over onto the deck.

Fire might bar the way, but if musketeers or cannons arrived, they could fire through the flames and sink the ship easily. In fact, even flaming arrows would be lethal.

As Maiza looked back anxiously, he saw a familiar face approaching. “Fermet! You’re all right?!”

“Yes, somehow. I managed to get the others in the house safely away as well.”

“Oh, thank God...! Hurry and board! Czes and Begg are already on the ship!”

“All right,” said Fermet as he slipped past him.

After making sure he was the last one, Maiza moved to board the ship.

Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, amid the churning smoke on top of a building, he saw movement.

“—!”

Every cell in his body was on the alert as the figure on the roof leaped out of the smoke and down, straight toward him.

Spotting the silver sword in his assailant’s hand, Maiza jumped back just in time.

The building hadn’t been tall, but leaping from any roof was no small feat. Even then, as this person closed the distance to Maiza, they did not move like someone who was injured.

Instinctively drawing the knife he wore at his waist, Maiza used it to stop his opponent’s blade.

A metallic clash rang out, and the alchemists on the ship all turned back to look at the port's flagstones, just as two new shadows jumped down and made their way toward the ship.

The figures were lightly equipped men armed with stilettos, and the alchemists immediately identified them as Dormентаire bodyguards.

As many of them instantly guessed from that fact, the one who had first slashed at Maiza was the captain of the envoy, Carla Alvarez Santoña.

"...You have some skill with a blade."

"Carla..."

Once each knew who the other was, Maiza and Carla put some distance between themselves.

"I told you before: I won't let that ship sail."

"I don't suppose you'd look the other way for us."

"Was that supposed to be a joke?!" Carla launched herself at Maiza again.

Maiza's knife parried her sharp thrust skillfully, and the blades screeched roughly against each other.

Meanwhile, the two bodyguards leaped, attempting to board the ship, but two passengers jumped off the boat and kicked them back down into the water.

"My apologies. Only those whose names are on the passenger list are allowed to board."

"Let me just say this: I could fight them both on my own."

Denkurou and Nile landed on the dock. When he saw them, Maiza put some distance between himself and Carla again.

"You two...", he murmured.

“For the moment, we may safely leave the wheel to Zank. However, if you are not on board, Maiza, this voyage will have no purpose.”

“Let me just say this: I can fight them both on my own. You should return along with him, Denkurou.”

Nile glared at the guards, holding an enormous knife that looked like a billhook slung over his shoulder. Unlike the day they’d first met, Nile was armed.

Caution colored the guards’ expressionless faces. Instead of rushing in to attack, they kept the distance between them as wide as they could afford.

After making sure the precarious balance would not break, Maiza spoke to Carla again. “There’s no need to shed blood here, yours or ours. Would you please withdraw, Carla?”

“No need...? And what of your decoy running through town? If they die, do you mean to tell me their blood was a necessary sacrifice?”

The “Mask Maker” who was currently fleeing the soldiers through the streets was most likely a decoy, intended to help the alchemists get away. And the diversion was working; the Dormентаire troops that Carla’s orders hadn’t reached, and the townspeople who were trying to capture the criminal independently, had scattered across the center of town in pursuit.



However, this information was new to Maiza. He frowned.

“...? What are you talking about?”

“.....”

Don't play the fool, Carla almost said, but then she took a long look at Maiza's face. She could see no trace of dishonesty there. And she knew very well that Maiza wasn't the sort of person who'd use another's life as a decoy.

Did one of the other alchemists arrange this without his knowledge?

Or what if... What if it's entirely unrelated, and I fail to capture the culprit who sank Lady Lucrezia's ship because I'm distracted here?

Even so...I can't afford to back down!

“...It's a pity, Maiza. I would have liked to talk with you more under different circumstances.”

“So would I.”

Carla had come to Lotto Valentino to bring the town under her masters' control.

Maiza had sensed the limits in the town and was leaving it.

Their positions were different, but they'd connected multiple times and had come to trust each other.

For that very reason, they had always understood that things might end up this way someday.

Their relationship wasn't so shallow that they could attack without hesitation, or so deep that they could cut each other down with no regrets.

As they confronted each other from just beyond the range of their weapons, their positions were a perfect allegory for the delicate distance between them.

Meanwhile, as Denkurou faced off against the bodyguards, he looked conflicted.

Should they go on the attack, Nile will almost certainly cut our opponents down. And then we will truly be wanted men. However, defeating these bodyguards will take our full strength.

Everything was different from that incident on their first day here, both the circumstances and the tension in the air.

That was when Denkurou abruptly remembered what Zank had said when Victor stopped them.

(“It appears that we are fated to have someone stop our fights here. How perfect it would be if this happened a third time.”)

Fate, hmm?

If I place my hopes in fate, I can no longer call myself an alchemist.

Giving a small, wry smile, he took a few deep breaths.

All right. I shall put up a fight.

He’d incapacitate the two bodyguards before Nile could cut them.

If worse came to worst, he’d end up fighting Nile as well, but he would cross that bridge when he reached it. Even if he and Nile felled each other here, as long as Zank was there, the ship would sail.

Steeling himself for his own death in an instant, Denkurou focused until he could hear each heartbeat in his muscles, preparing to act faster than anyone else.

However, a moment sooner than that—fate once again arrived.

To Denkurou, it only looked like a third coincidence.

To a certain other individual, it wasn’t fate or anything of the sort. It was merely part of the plan.

Breaking the tension among the six combatants—several pottery spheres flew in between Maiza, his allies, and the bodyguards and smashed against the ground.

Although there was no telling how the trick was done, the liquid filling them scattered and simultaneously burst into an inferno.

The spheres soared in, one after another, temporarily creating a wall of fire.

“What’s this...?!”

Carla’s route to the *Advena Avis* had been cut off. As she retreated from the flames, she looked in the direction the spheres had come from—and her eyes widened in astonishment.

Ten or so figures stood on the roof from which she and the others had jumped. Every one of them wore a hooded cloak and a distinctive mask.

“...! The Mask Makers?!” Carla shouted, just as a distant explosion reached her ears. “?!”

When she looked toward the noise, beyond a street choked with rubble, she saw that the Dormentaires’ maritime fortress was on fire.

With Szilard’s ship, only a vessel on the edge had exploded. This time, a chain of explosions was radiating out from the center, sending the fortress blazing up like an enormous firework.

“Why, you... You bastards!”

These Mask Makers had to be the ones who’d sunk Lucrezia’s ship as well.

Full of fury, Carla glared at them—but the Mask Makers ignored her. Looking at Maiza, Denkurou, and Nile, who were standing there stunned, they slowly pointed toward the ship.

The gesture probably meant *Hurry and board*.

Maiza and Denkurou looked at each other, then promptly turned on their heels and leaped onto the deck.

“Wait! I have a score to settle with these...”

While Nile was still speaking, Denkurou grabbed him by his collar and practically dragged him onto the deck.

“Denkurou! You filthy...!”

“Zank! Let us depart!”

Ignoring Nile’s furious insults, Denkurou removed the plank they’d used to bridge the deck and the land and ordered Zank to set sail.

“Denkurou!”

“Calm yourself, Nile!” Denkurou shouted back sternly. “Look there!”

The others on board the ship looked in the direction he’d indicated.

A warship had been cut loose from the burning maritime fortress and was headed their way.

“We have no weaponry! If they fire on us, we’re sunk!”



Lotto Valentino On a rooftop

Hearing yet another explosion from the direction of the port, Niki raised her head uneasily.

Don’t tell me the Advena Avis was attacked...

From the rooftops where she had been running, Niki looked over anxiously. When she saw that it was the Dormentaires’ floating fortress that was on fire, and not the *Advena Avis*, she gave a little sigh of relief.

However, nobody noticed the change in her expression.

This was partly because she was running over the roofs—and partly because she was currently dressed as a Mask Maker.

About an hour earlier, Fermet had come to her to tell her good-bye. She'd been prepared for that. In order to get Czes safely away, Fermet had resolved to board a ship. She herself wasn't an alchemist, and unlike Gretto and Sylvie, she had no good reason to go with them.

However, Fermet had bid her good-bye in an unusual way.

"This is where we must part ways, Niki... If you'd like, you may board the *Advena Avis* in my place. I'm sure Maiza and the others won't object very strongly."

When she asked him what this was about, he quietly shook his head.

"I'm going to cause a distraction so that the *Advena Avis* will be able to leave port safely."

When Niki saw the mask and cloak he was holding, she understood. By becoming a Mask Maker and letting himself be spotted, he was planning to attract soldiers and citizens from all over the town to himself.

Niki tried to stop him, telling him it was dangerous, but Fermet shook his head and told her that someone had to.

"I'll do it." The words left her mouth before she knew what was happening.

Fermet looked startled, and she smiled as brightly as she could.

"It's all right. You know my past, don't you? I know the alleys like the back of my hand. I'll be a far better decoy than you."

Fermet told her it was too dangerous and tried to stop her. He argued for several minutes, but she stubbornly refused to listen until she finally snatched the mask from him.

“I hate this place. If I can cause a bit of chaos as my revenge, I want to do it. That’s all. Besides, I dressed like a Mask Maker when I went to see that rich boy, Gretto, and it was rather fun. I prefer to work from the shadows.”

That’s a lie.

Even as she smiled, she knew she wasn’t telling the truth.

I don’t give a damn about the townspeople one way or another. I can work in public or in private. I just don’t want Fermet to put himself in danger. I only want to be useful to him.

I think he’s...he’s the place to die that I’ve been searching for.

However, she wasn’t able to say any of that aloud. She only dug in her heels and insisted she take his place.

As if Fermet had read her mind—he pulled her into a tight embrace.

“Thank you...Niki,” he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. “Just promise me you won’t die for a man like me. I can’t be your place to die. You must find it at the end of a life you’ve lived to the fullest.”

...!

He knows.

My feelings reached him.

The next thing she knew, she was about to start crying herself. To hide her tears, she put on the mask.

“It’s fine. After all...I am a Mask Maker.”

And now she was running through the streets.

Back then, her heart and Fermet’s had been connected.

Pulse pounding, feelings blazing, she ran and ran and ran.

When Monica had saved her, how had she felt?

How had Elmer felt?

She hadn't thought that choosing to help someone would make her feel so very alive. For what was practically the first time in her life, she was savoring the joy of living.

She didn't know, of course.

After she'd told Fermet good-bye and dashed off as the Mask Maker—

Fermet had murmured "Thank you" with a faint smile.

And then, immediately afterward, he had whispered to himself with a twisted kind of trust.

"I knew you'd do that for me."



The port

"You scoundrels... You really were in league with those alchemists!" Carla shouted at the Mask Makers on the roof, but there was no response.

Damn it, aren't the musketeers here yet?

If she had a gun, she'd have no trouble shooting them down from the roof.

However, many of their weapons storehouses had been bombed over the past two weeks, so their number of guns had dwindled considerably. Meanwhile, the soldiers with muskets were scattered all over town. The guns were currently concentrated on the maritime fortress, but with that explosion, there was no telling what the situation was like there.

Carla was trying to think of a way to get back up on the roof, but—
incredibly, one of the Mask Makers jumped lightly down.

Carla and the bodyguards were surprised, but they held their blades at the ready.

What is he trying to do? If he's planning to attack us, he could have just kept throwing those spheres at us from the roof.

Wary of her opponent, Carla issued a formal order. "This is a warning: Remove your mask and drop your weapons." She'd made a surprise attack on Maiza, but this time, she wanted to find out what this person was after first.

However, that was when she finally noticed something else.

Due to the sea wind and the fire, she hadn't picked up on it at all, but the moment the Mask Maker had dropped down in front of her, something had changed in her surroundings.

The Mask Maker took a step closer, putting a hand to their mask. That was when the change became especially noticeable, and she realized what her senses were trying to warn her of.

In the next instant, both she and the bodyguards had dropped their weapons and fallen to their knees.

Just as they'd done a year ago, when the Mask Makers had hit them with a paralysis potion.



Thirty minutes later At sea

"This is bad. They'll catch up to us."

"Isn't there anything we can do?!"

On board the *Advena Avis*, the alchemists were nearly panicking.

For a vessel of its size, this ship moved unreasonably fast. However, only three of the people on it had decent sailing skills, and the pursuing warship was closing the distance. Before long, it would be within firing range.

"Dammit! We can replenish our supplies at our first port of call. If we throw some of the heaviest items overboard..."

Speaking on impulse, one of the alchemists moved to open the door to the storeroom, but—the door opened from the inside, and the gleaming silver muzzle of a gun peeked out.

“All right, that’s far enough! Stop right there!”

The man’s shout carried across the deck, and all the alchemists turned to look.

Victor Talbot was standing there in sooty clothes, holding the same sort of weapon the lord and the other aristocrats had: a three-shot flintlock pistol.

“Victor?!” Denkurou cried from where he’d been trimming a sail.

“How on earth did you get aboard this ship?!”

“I knew you were up to something. I’ve been hiding in a barrel in the ship’s storeroom for days.” Proudly revealing his rather pathetic trick, Victor pointed his gun at Maiza. “Maiza Avaro, stop this ship immediately. If you cooperate, I can wave from the deck before they sink you.”

“Victor...wasn’t it?”

Maybe they had run into each other at the Third Library; each seemed to know the other by sight.

“Enough of these meaningless games, all right? I don’t care whether you’re chasing knowledge to America or summoning demons, but you’re not stupid enough to bring women and little children down with the ship, are you?”

As Victor went on with his warning, he glanced at Czes, who was sleeping peacefully on Begg’s back, and Sylvie, who was squeezing Gretto’s hand with fright.

“To think you’d actually slip through Carla’s net and put out to sea. What kind of magic trick did it take?”

Since he'd been in the storeroom, he apparently hadn't seen the exchange at the port or the state of the town itself.

The question was only natural, at least to Victor, and Maiza answered it despite the gun pointed his way. "We don't really know, either."

"What? What kind of idiotic...?"

"More importantly, would you lower your gun? Any stray bullets may strike a woman or a small child."

"Ha! Well said. I like you."

After he was sure that the warship was still coming up behind them, he slowly lowered the gun. However, he hadn't lowered his guard. He looked around at the alchemists with wary eyes.

"I'll tell you now, taking me hostage won't do you any good."

"Then perhaps you'll find a use as food for the fish."

At some point, Nile had stepped away from the helm and confronted Victor, billhook in hand.

"Nile! The ship is losing speed!" Denkurou shouted.

Nile scoffed. "It matters not. They will catch up to us regardless. I will simply have to leap onto the other ship and dispose of our pursuers."

"You are truly bellicose, aren't you? I'm glad I ended that fight when I first met you. If I hadn't, our troops would've been massacred," Victor muttered, sounding rather appalled, but he still didn't let his guard down.

What he did respond to was—

—the stunned voice of an alchemist who'd been watching the oncoming warship through a telescope.

"Hey... *Somebody on that deck is waving at us.*"

“What?”

Victor frowned. Then he realized the other ship hadn't fired a single warning shot.

The town was out of sight already. If they attacked without sinking the ship, it wasn't likely to cause friction between the Mars Clan and House Dormентаire.

He put his gun back into the holster on his hip, forgetting that everyone around him was an enemy, and grabbed the telescope from the alchemist.

“Lemme see that.”

When he peered through the spyglass, he saw several familiar faces.

The one that caught his attention belonged to the individual on the right of the waving man, a figure with distinctive white whiskers.

“I-if it ain't old Szilard!!”

Meanwhile, Maiza had been observing the ship through a different telescope and was just as surprised.

“No... It can't be.”

“Wh-what's wrong, Maiza?” Gretto asked.

“The ship... Please, stop the ship!”

“Huh?!”

Maiza didn't even hear as he stared through the telescope at two people he knew.

On the deck, waving his hands, was Elmer C. Albatross.

Standing on his left was Huey Laforet.



Thirty minutes earlier The port

Carla's weapon slipped from her fingers as she fell to her knees, just the way she had a year ago.

But this time, she wasn't losing consciousness. She was *kneeling*.

The change she and the bodyguards had sensed in the air had been—

—the *faint, drifting scent of peaches*.

The Mask Maker who'd leaped down from the roof removed the mask.

Carla hadn't seen the face behind for a long time—the face of her mistress.

At the same time, one after another, the Mask Makers on the roof stripped off their masks. Carla recognized several of them as Lucrezia's bodyguards.

"I knew it... I knew you were alive!"

As Carla raised her head, her eyes filling with tears, her mistress—Lucrezia de Dormентаire—gave a mocking giggle.

"My, my! Your face is even more adorable than I expected it would be. The two behind you still refuse to react to anything, I see."

She looked around restlessly, then tilted her head slightly, perplexed.

"I wanted to see Victor's expression, too. Where could he have gone?"



Thirty minutes later On the *Advena Avis*

Out on the ocean, the warship had caught up, and the *Advena Avis* had temporarily dropped anchor.

On its deck, a shocking revelation was being shared.

“Lucrezia...staged the whole thing?”

In that moment, Victor’s face was so comical it defied description. Later on, Elmer would say, *“It’s a real shame they didn’t have digital cameras back then. It was the most hilarious face I’ve ever seen! If I’d gotten a photo of it, I would’ve been able to make a whole lot of people laugh.”*

As it was, Victor seemed to be a completely different person, and most of the alchemists were desperately choking back laughter as they watched him.

However, Maiza didn’t even look at Victor as he pressed Elmer for answers.

“Is that true?! Lucrezia de Dormентаire is alive?”

“She certainly is. She said she’d changed her clothes and her makeup, and nobody had noticed her in town for the past several days. She assumed Carla would still recognize her, so she didn’t go near her. And she was grumbling that Victor wasn’t around.”

“In town...? What did she do at night? Don’t tell me she was on the maritime fortress?!”

“Not quite. Speran’s house,” Elmer answered easily.

Maiza was appalled.

“Speran just can’t turn down a request from a woman.” Elmer cackled as he explained in his own way, which rather missed the point.

Maiza had been asking for a detailed explanation all along, but Victor had found his ill-tempered manner again and shoved him aside, hauling Elmer up by his collar.

“Start at the beginning, Elmer! *You didn’t tell me a bloody thing about this!*”

Maiza was surprised to hear that.

Victor shouldn't have any connection with Elmer; how had he known his name?

"...Are you two acquainted?"

"Acquainted? Hell..." Victor hesitated, then said, "Ahh, damn it all, it doesn't matter now." Irritably, he explained his connection to Elmer:

"This smile-obsessed lunatic was one of the Dormентаire spies."



Elmer C. Albatross was addicted to smiles.

No matter what sort of person he was dealing with, he was on the side of anyone who wasn't smiling.

One year ago, after Monica had died and Huey had disappeared—he'd realized that a woman he'd met in town several times hadn't been smiling at all lately.

He'd tried everything he could to make her smile, but she'd only said, *Away with you. You alchemists are enemies to us...and the House of Dormентаire.* She hadn't seemed willing to open her heart to anyone.

Even so, Elmer had kept on stubbornly urging her to smile, and the woman, Carla, had finally told him this:

If you want me to smile so badly, then bring me information about the local alchemists.

The next day, Elmer had brought Carla a whole stack of the Third Library's technical books. *Don't tell anybody*, he'd said.

Frightened by his lack of hesitation, Carla had said, *...From now on, do as the circumstances require.* She'd faked a smile and tried to send him on his way.

But her false smile was not enough for Elmer. *I'm not settling for a fake smile, so I'll bring you whatever else you need!* he'd said,

refusing to leave her alone—until he had settled in reporting town gossip and other news to the Dormentaires as one of their spies.

And so it had gone, up till the present.



“You know, when she talked with you, Maiza, Carla always smiled a little afterward. I think she was trying to hide it.”

“She was?! ...No, we can talk about that later. Elmer, are you mad? Why would you help Moni...?”

Why would you help Monica’s enemies, the House of Dormentaire?

Maiza stopped himself before he could finish the sentence.

He’d seen Huey, standing just behind Elmer. He’d also remembered that, questions of sanity aside, Elmer had always been this way.

In that case, then, the next matter of concern was Huey Laforet’s presence.

“...Huey. Why are you here? Were you really involved in the bombings?”

It was a straightforward question, and everyone else was nervous to hear the answer.

Huey gave a faint smile. “About half of them, I think.”

“Half?”

“Yes. The arson attempts on the mansions were not my doing, nor were several of the other attacks. They were most likely the work of another, making it look like it was my doing.”

Gretto had been standing near the edge of the deck, and his face went pale as he heard Huey’s answer.

However, the only ones who noticed were Sylvie and Fermet. For Sylvie's part, she assumed he was remembering being attacked. Fermet, who knew the truth, only smiled to himself.

"Now hold on. Someone explain all this to me... Who are you?" Victor asked.

Huey bowed deferentially. "Ah yes, I should have introduced myself. I am Huey Laforet. I'm affiliated with Lotto Valentino's Third Library. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Victor Talbot."

"You know me?"

"Yes, Lady Lucrezia and Szilard have often told me about you."

"How the hell...?!"

Befuddled, Victor looked over at Szilard, who'd seated himself on a crate on the deck.

Victor's eyes were clearly demanding an explanation, and Szilard clicked his tongue quietly in irritation, then obliged. "For God's sake, Victor, your intuition is terribly poor. Huey has been our collaborator since before you and I reached Lotto Valentino."

"He what?!"

"He's a tenacious one. He suddenly snuck into Lady Lucrezia's bedchamber and offered her an exchange: the manufacturing method for the false gold for a relationship with the Dormентаire workshop."

"....."

Victor didn't seem capable of putting his astonishment into words anymore. His mouth flapped soundlessly, a whole cocktail of emotions on his face.

“It certainly was a rather intriguing method. He also had a way with gunpowder, while it’s a weakness of ours. I was told she allowed him to deal with us as an equal collaborator.”

“Nobody told me about this! This is the first I’ve heard of it!”

“Why would it be necessary to tell a stripling like you? You can’t keep a secret to save your life,” Szilard snapped.

Delivering the finishing blow, Huey smiled and murmured an apology.

“I’m sorry, Victor. Lucrezia also said that she wanted to surprise you, so I shouldn’t mention it until you noticed it yourself.”

“Shut the *hell* up, you *bastard*!”

As Victor flew into a rage, Denkurou and Zank restrained him, then knocked him out and tossed him into the storeroom.

Putting everything together, including Huey’s account, Maiza had a picture of what had happened.

Huey Laforet had—unbelievably, in Maiza’s view—spent the whole year ingratiating himself with the House of Dormентаire, Monica’s enemies, and had gained generous funding and influence.

After that, although Maiza didn’t know what the circumstances had been, Lucrezia de Dormентаire had needed to publicly fake her own death. She’d chosen to do it in Lotto Valentino, a place which was a singularity both for the House of Dormентаire and for all the countries of Europe.

Szilard and Huey had planted gunpowder all over, carefully ensuring that no lives would be lost, and perpetrated the bombings to feign the return of the Mask Makers.

Then, when Lucrezia de Dormентаire visited the city for pleasure, her ship was destroyed and sunk with a clockwork explosive device. The widespread assumption that the Mask Makers had killed her had

been part of the plan. Lucrezia and the others on the ship had evacuated at the previous port of call; the vessel had been piloted by a skeleton crew, who had transferred to the *Advena Avis* out on the ocean, waited for the right wind, then set up the clockwork bomb and sent the unmanned ship sailing toward the port.

After that, they only had to wait for the explosion, then enter port as sailors on the *Advena Avis*, feigning ignorance. All according to plan.

This meant the financial concern that had sent the *Advena Avis* here had also been in on the plan, although he didn't know whether the transaction was monetary or political.

They'd all been in on it together.

Ultimately, the serial bombings today were meant to conclude the scenario: *Even as the Mask Makers struck the town of Lotto Valentino with one last, fierce onslaught, the House of Dormентаire succeeded in obliterating them. Exhausted from the fight and having avenged Lucrezia, the House of Dormентаire took the opportunity to superficially withdraw. From this point on, they would grasp the sum of the alchemists' knowledge in more subtle ways.*

The fire on the maritime fortress had been Szilard's doing. After becoming a "victim" by bombing his own room, he had traveled all over it at will, supposedly investigating entry routes, and used that opportunity to plant bombs.

Had Dalton and the others known about this as well? Were they in on it, too? For a moment, that question crossed Maiza's mind—but he decided not to think about it. Doubting them would only make him angry and waste his energy.

If I want to change the world, must I overcome these absurd twists of fate as well?

Perhaps the absurd power of immortality is an effective way to fight against such an equally absurd power.

Even as he thought that, Maiza remembered the hometown he'd already put behind him. Lucrezia de Dormентаire had destroyed the place where he'd been born, and he couldn't easily forgive her for what she'd done.

However, Gretto and Sylvie had been saved, and his astonishment at what Huey had done had quelled about half of that anger.

Huey... What on earth happened to him?

Maiza really couldn't believe it.

Hadn't the Dormentaires taken his beloved Monica's life? Why was he cooperating with them?

He considered the possibility that Huey had only pretended to cooperate and was planning to bring down the House of Dormентаire from the inside.

But when Maiza looked at him, it really did seem as though the word *revenge* couldn't have been farther from his mind.

I simply realized that avenging Monica wouldn't bring her back.

That was what Huey himself had said, but was it possible to be so rational about something like this? How much conflict and despair had he endured over the course of this past year?

...And where could he have found his hope?

Maiza tried to deduce the contents of Huey's empty year—then gave up, realizing it was useless.

Even if he managed to gain eternity, that didn't give him the ability to know a whole year from someone else's life.

Immortality isn't all-powerful, he warned himself as he let his thoughts run to the continent far across the sea—and to the distant edge of time.

“Well, well. If you have something as preposterous as a secret elixir of immortality, I wish you’d hurry up and show it to me,” Szilard said to Maiza as he leaned on the ship’s gunwale, brooding about something.

One of the alchemists raised an objection to Szilard’s condescending tone. “Now, wait just a moment. You and Victor should get off at our next port of call. Huey and Elmer, too! The only ones allowed to participate in the experiment are the ones whose names are on the passenger list. That was the arrangement! We need to know exactly who becomes immortal!”

The surrounding alchemists spoke up in agreement.

However, Huey and the other latecomers hardly reacted. If Victor had been there, he would probably have responded in kind and started a fight, but he was still unconscious in the storeroom.

“Maiza, didn’t Dalton give you something?”

“Hmm?”

At Huey’s question, Maiza remembered he’d been given an envelope just before boarding the ship, with instructions to open it once they were safely out of port.

He promptly retrieved it from his luggage, and when he opened it—he found a list of additional passengers, with the names Huey Laforet, Elmer C. Albatross, Szilard Quates, and even Victor Talbot on it.

After the alchemists saw that, they couldn’t toss them off the ship. With the same doubt Maiza had felt earlier, they whispered among themselves and wondered how much Dalton had known.

Even now, I’m still at the mercy of the wills of others? Maiza sighed, ashamed of his own weakness. *I believed if I had enough time, even I might be able to change, but...*

Huey became like another person in a single year, while Elmer may never change at all. There are all different kinds.

Does that mean that change depends not on time but entirely on your own determination?

Pulling himself together again, Maiza let his thoughts drift to the day of the ritual of their voyage.

No one knew what would happen following that ritual.

And the ship quietly rode the waves...carrying a malicious, pitch-black heart on board.

Fermet—whose mind was whirling with innocent malevolence—was at the stern of the ship, gazing at a pocket watch.

Czes had woken up and was having fun exploring the ship with Begg.

The boy kept a smile on his face, desperately trying to hide his fears about the voyage and the new land. Fermet wanted to watch him more like this—but now, with his watch in one hand, he was filling his mind with countless fantasies.

Ahh, it's almost time. Almost time.

I wonder how she's reacting. I wonder what she's feeling.

I wish I could see it for myself...and that I can't is my greatest regret, Niki.





Lotto Valentino The port

“Oh, I really wish you wouldn’t be so angry, Carla dear,” Lucrezia sulked.

“Don’t toy with me, please!” Carla barked back angrily.

After she’d learned the truth of the situation, Carla’s tears of joy had transformed into furious anger.

“What on earth were you thinking?! How much trouble do you think that plan of yours has caused this town?! Many people have been hurt! The damage from the explosions today alone... Oh, for the love of—!”

“Well, in his letters to me, dear Victor wrote almost daily that the people in this town were bastards, darling. I thought it might serve them right if we singed them a little.”

“Enough! There are more wounded among the Dormентаire troops! More importantly, what were you going to do if you’d hurt children? Or visitors who’d come to see the libraries?! Do you have any idea how terrified the alchemists who’ve left town must feel?!”

Carla’s anger was perfectly natural, but Lucrezia’s face was shining as she turned toward her guard.

“Oh, that was all part of our plan. Lotto Valentino is a town for the alchemists, as you may recall. So I thought it might be best for everyone if we dispersed the people after we had control of their knowledge, before other nobles or countries could step in. Really, this incident was a very minor one for my family, you know. Why all this anger?”

Her mistress cocked her head, looking puzzled as Carla shouted at her furiously.

“You cannot plunder a town and call it minor! Yes, Lady Lucrezia, I will do everything in my power to bring you what you desire, even if I must be reviled as a villain. However, there is no need for you to do evil personally and deceive me, as you did this time! Do you have any idea how much I worried...?”

Just as her true feelings nearly slipped out—

—dull, percussive noises echoed from all over town.

“...What?! More bombs?”

“That’s odd, isn’t it? It should be over by now.”

“There, you see?! Not everything goes the way you want it to, Lady Lucrezia!”

Carla went on lecturing her mistress, while the eminent noblewoman who had been officially killed sniffled.

They didn’t know.

In the shadow of those last explosions—a tragedy had been born.



Ten minutes earlier The subbasement of an abandoned building, somewhere in Lotto Valentino

“...This place is full of memories,” Niki murmured.

She had stepped into a room brimming over with glittering false gold, like the inside of a pirate’s treasure chest.

She had been here just once before, back in 1705. After Elmer and his friends had saved her and burned the ship where the drug was being manufactured—just once, she’d been brought to this room. It was where she’d learned the secret of the Mask Maker, Monica Campanella.

It had been Huey's safe house originally, but after Elmer and Monica had also begun using it, the place had become a hideout for the Mask Makers. At its largest, the Mask Maker organization had had several hundred members, but as far as she knew, only the four of them had known about this place.

She took a look at her pocket watch and closed her eyes, slowly remembering what Fermet had told her.

Niki, I'll tell you the spot you should flee to when your work is done.

That was what Fermet had told her when she'd insisted she would be the decoy.

This is...something Elmer told me about, when I told him I planned to act as a decoy. He told me it's a safe place to hide in an absolute emergency.

Then he'd told her about the safe house, which she happened to already know.

Niki had thought Elmer had always been planning to board the *Advena Avis*, like Fermet's group, and so she'd believed those words without question. If she hadn't been in love with Fermet, if she'd listened to those words with a level head, she might have noticed the inconsistency.

No matter what Fermet had said to Elmer, Elmer would have volunteered to be the decoy himself. Why hadn't he stopped Fermet from taking that job?

Anyone who knew Elmer well would have wondered, but Niki never thought of it.

And that was what brought tragedy down on her.

Although, even if she had divined Fermet's malicious intent, her love for him still would have invited tragedy.

"...?"

She heard a sound overhead, and then the footsteps and voices of several men. Someone had come down into the first basement, above her.

Just to be safe, Niki extinguished several lights, then listened to the voices from upstairs in the dark.

“Did he really come in here?”

When Niki heard that menacing voice, her heart almost stopped.

She’d heard it frequently five years ago—it belonged to the large bald man who’d called himself her foster parent.

She’d bashed him with a chair and knocked him away when they burned the drug workshop on the ship, and she hadn’t seen him since. She’d heard that he’d been arrested by the lord, but apparently he’d been released.

“I saw him run into this abandoned building. Just as our informant said he would.”

“Who’d have thought the Mask Makers had a hideout here...?”

“If we catch him, the Dormentaires might pay us a bounty.”

She recognized all the voices.

They belonged to her former “employers,” who had forced her and the other children to slave away making drugs.

Why? Why are they here?!

Her heart shrieked in a viselike grip of terror.

The past she’d nearly forgotten flooded back with a chorus of screams in her mind. As if they were trying to make her panic, the men overhead were noisily searching for something with heavy footfalls as they talked about the Mask Makers.

"I can't believe our luck. I thought it was hogwash; it's a good thing we kept an eye out."

"If it's their hideout, won't their whole trove of counterfeit gold be there, too?"

"Most likely... I bet there's a mountain of it. Maybe they bought some real gold to store here with all the money they earned with the false gold."

"Damn, what a complicated plan. Well, let's keep looking."

"The Mask Maker looked like a kid to me. Or maybe a woman."

"Huh. If it's a woman, we can have some fun with her before we slaughter her."

What on earth is going on?

They were watching this place?

Who told them about it?

Huey? Or Elmer?

Who? Another name came to mind in response to that question—but her heart refused to acknowledge it, and she focused all her attention on finding a way out of her current situation.

Something... Something I can use...

Since she only had the light of one candle left, she very nearly had to search by feel.

If they had that many people looking, it wouldn't take them long to find the hidden door that led to this subbasement.

I have to hurry...

An object seemed to leap out at her: a wooden box placed prominently in the midst of the false gold, with several black spheres inside it.

Strangely—the black spheres had clocks bound to them, with shafts that extended from the gears of the clocks into the interiors of the spheres.

The moment she saw them, it hit her. These might be the clockwork bombs the people at the studio had been gossiping about. Were these the ones the bomber had been using, that exploded when a set time came?

And then she realized—all the clocks attached to the black spheres were moving.

Niki felt cold sweat break out all over her body.

After all this time looking for her place to die, she had found a mass of death right in front of her. All her hair stood on end.

These are going to...explode? When? How much time is left?!

So Huey really was behind these incidents?

Why now? Why would he blow this place up?!

Who set these? Who told those men about this place?

Who? Who? Who? Who? Who?

Huey? Elmer? Or...Fermet...?

The questions rose and vanished in her mind, but she had no conclusive evidence for any of the answers.

Elmer told Fermet about this place...

Was he trying to kill Fermet? Why?

No. That's not possible. Elmer would never, ever do that.

Fermet isn't the kind of person anyone would have a grudge against, either.

Then who? Who? Who? Who?

No, that can't be—it wasn't anybody! If I've got time to doubt...I need to think of a way to escape, or else...

If she stayed in the basement, she'd die in the explosion.

If the men upstairs came down here before the explosion, she'd die then, too.

If she went up to the first basement in an attempt to escape, they'd catch her and kill her.

The more calmly Niki thought about it, the more aware of her own death she became.

If she had any chance at all, it lay in the possibility the men might fail to find the hidden door, give up, and leave before the explosion. That, or the possibility that she could break through the group of men upstairs on her own and make a getaway.

However, even Niki knew those were empty dreams.

Despair painted her heart a deep, dark black.

Oh, I see.

She realized.

It's here, then.

The place she'd thought she was looking for. But it had never been something she could find herself. It was always meant to find her.

This...is my place to die.

The moment Niki had that thought, she realized all her impatience and fear had disappeared.

Slowly, she picked up the box that held the clockwork bombs, then gently set it down at the top of the stairs that led to the upper basement. The men would probably find it the moment they discovered the secret door to this basement.

She'd done it to scare them; she hadn't had the slightest thought of distancing herself from the bombs.

If she was going to be blown up anyway, she wanted to be sure she took that scum with her. That was her only reason.

I used to think they didn't matter to me at all, but...

...maybe I really did resent them, all this time.

Or maybe...I just want company on this journey.

Mildly surprised by her own pettiness, she quietly walked to the back of a dead-end passage in the second basement.

Maybe they'd planned to make a room, then decided against it. She sat down at the back of that dark, rough-hewn passage beyond the light of the candle, quietly closed her eyes, and thought to herself.

Had she managed to change, ultimately?

Had she grown stronger?

Have I found the right place to die?

In the depths of a dark, dark passage, with nowhere left to go, aware of the countless murderous intents bearing down on her—the girl wondered about these things, quietly, as death came closer.

The answer to her question didn't present itself.

Even so, she was satisfied.

Whatever she was, it didn't matter now.

This is my place to die.

But, at the end...I found a way to live for someone else's sake...for Fermet, didn't I?

If this is the result, then it means this is the place I chose to die.

She was just happy she'd been able to form a connection with someone.

*None of it matters now. I don't care who told them about this place.
I don't care who set the bombs.*

Whether it was Fermet, or Elmer, or Huey.

Even if all three of them hated me all this time, I don't mind.

It's strange. I'm getting less and less scared of dying.

She continued to think.

*I wonder if Monica felt this way, too... I wonder if she felt connected
to Huey.*

Elmer had told her how her friend, her benefactor, had died.

I wonder if that's why she was able to die smiling.

I wonder if I'll be able to die smiling now.

The girl was wearing a mask.

Ultimately, she had left no major impact on the world, but she took pride in being able to become a Mask Maker, even temporarily.

As death steadily closed in on her, she at least wanted to die in a way she could be proud of.

She once believed it was the Mask Makers that had been her place to die—and remembering that made her realize something.

Oh. How silly... This is just how it was to begin with.

Six years ago, as one of the Mask Makers, she'd been fated to be killed by another Mask Maker. As she remembered her past self—Niki began to feel more at peace.

Maybe the oppressive sense of death she felt in that dark space had reminded her of the past.

I see.

I've only gone back to the past. That's why it's not scary.

I'm alone again...no different than I was before.

Six years ago, she'd accepted death constantly this way.

Oh... I haven't changed at all, not one little bit.

I really couldn't be like Monica.

I can't smile the way she did.

I'm glad I have this mask.

I'm really glad.

Niki's calm heart trembled a little—and she pressed the mask against her face, tightly.

After all, I don't want anyone to see I died crying.

I do want to smile.

I've found my place to die. I want to die smiling, and yet...

I'm sorry, Elmer.

That was when she realized something with a jolt.

I should be thinking about Fermet, not Elmer.

I need to apologize to Fermet.

I'm such a fool.

This is why...I'm... I...

Before long, she heard the sound of the hidden door opening.

Then angry yells from the men.

A soft *click*.

And then—



The Advena Avis

"It's probably exploding right about now, don't you think?" Elmer said, glancing at his pocket watch.

"...Yes, probably," Huey responded indifferently.

"What a waste. That hideout still had plenty of valuables in it."

"That's all right. I decided to erase all traces of the Mask Makers from the town."

"But that doesn't mean you had to blow it up."

"It's best if it's completely gone. You were the one who wanted to keep Niki away from there when she came back to town. You didn't want people to think she was a Mask Maker, remember?"

"Well, yes, but still."

Elmer and Huey were conversing quietly enough that no one else could hear them.

However, the person watching them from a distance guessed the content of their conversation with almost perfect accuracy.

Lebreau Fermet Viralesque.

Ever since Elmer had brought Sylvie to the Meyer residence, something had been nettling him. The feeling was vague and unobtrusive, but he'd sensed a peculiar danger in this Elmer C. Albatross fellow.

Come to think of it, his presence was why Huey's actions a year ago had deviated from what he'd anticipated.

Supremely wary of him, Fermet had been trailing Elmer—and seen him go into a certain abandoned building. Fermet had followed him inside and overheard their conversation in the hideout downstairs—including their plans to blow the place up on the day they left town on the ship.

It was a simple matter to lure Niki there, and just as simple to have the townspeople watch the hideout and block her escape.

Ahh. Niki, Niki.

Calling the girl's name over and over in his heart, Fermet smiled quietly.

You really were wonderful.

When he'd realized Niki was attracted to him, Fermet had been genuinely happy. She was a lovely person, both inside and out. As a lover, few girls would be as suitable as she was.

As a matter of fact, Fermet had already grown fond of Niki. After surviving years of despair, she had found a hope that would allow her to live.

How tremendously touching.

Fermet decided to love her from the bottom of his heart.

He wanted to see everything about her. Everything, from the first blush of love to the moment it all turned to despair.

Oh, I wonder what you're doing now. Did you die in the explosion? Did the men kill you? Did you survive through a stroke of fortune? Do you loathe me utterly now?

Or do you hate Elmer or Huey instead?

Out here, I can't even tell whether you're dead or alive.

He imagined dozens, no, hundreds, of fates for Niki.

He created fantasy after fantasy, everything from a future in which miracle upon miracle had occurred and she lived happily as the wife of the lord, to one where the explosion hadn't killed her completely and her body was slowly consumed by maggots until her last breath.

The possibilities were endless.

Calming his excited heart, Fermet slowly considered what would happen after he'd been reborn as an immortal at the end of this journey.

Oh, there's no meaning in becoming immortal all on my own.

My dear ones must become eternal with me.

That way...I'll be able to break them and cherish them again and again.

The future held infinite possibility.

Imagining a vast map of that future, Fermet smiled quietly. His smile was pure and untainted as he gazed out over the ocean, all alone.

Praying that this ship's destination would hold hopes without end.

And so the ship sailed westward—in order to summon a demon, to obtain the liquor of immortality.

Slowly, the *Advena Avis* forged through the waves.

Toward the place where the spectacular, centuries-long ruckus would begin.

Unaware that it was carrying a man more evil than any demon.



EPILOGUE

C'MON AND SMILE

EPILOGUE: C'MON AND SMILE

Several months later Somewhere on the American East Coast

And so a demon was summoned onto the ship.

And the tragedy that followed left many scars, particularly on Maiza and Sylvie.

But despite their grief and mourning, the ship sailed on, until at last they reached the eastern coast of the North American continent.

They intended to plant the seeds of the knowledge they already possessed and to gain new wisdom.

However, no shouts of joy went up. After all, they had lost many comrades along the way here.

A significant number of the alchemists were paranoid and suspicious of everyone else, and about half the survivors made themselves scarce without even saying good-bye to Maiza and the other passengers, let alone sharing their plans.

Fermet watched them, laughing inwardly, but then something occurred to him.

Come to think of it, Huey and Elmer don't know yet. No one has told them that their bombs may very well have killed Niki.

If he didn't tell them himself, they might never know. Thus, Fermet decided to correct this problem.

How is Niki to rest in peace if the people who killed her don't know about their crime? I really must tell them both.

Completely disregarding his own involvement, Fermet stepped forward.

I want to see how they will react.

He had no other goal or ulterior motive. That really was his only reason.



The port The wharf

On the eastern coast of North America, which was home to several colonies, Queen Anne's War was reaching its end.

The port town was small, and the war hardly seemed to have affected it at all.

The sudden arrival of the *Advena Avis* had caused a bit of a stir, but apparently this was only because the ship was a new model the locals weren't used to seeing. Before more than a few days had passed, the *Advena Avis* was just another part of the scenery as far as they were concerned.

In view of the ship, two men sat on the wooden wharf, fishing lines dangling off the side.

They were Huey Laforet and Elmer C. Albatross.

Now that most of the alchemists had left the ship, there weren't many people here.

After Szilard Quates had begun "eating" the others on the ship, many of them were afraid he might emerge from the ocean, and they'd headed inland. Conversely, Maiza spent his days gazing out over that ocean, as if he were lying in wait for him.

However, Huey and Elmer didn't seem particularly concerned with any of it as they got used to the new area.

A man quietly came to stand behind them.

"Are you catching anything?" Fermet asked, as most people do when they speak to a fisherman. He slowly crouched down without waiting for a response.

“Nothing. I thought we might manage to land...I dunno, maybe an alligator or something.”

“It’s rare to see you without Czeslaw.”

Elmer had given an easygoing answer, while Huey had responded with an implied question of his own.

Fermet smiled a little, then answered Huey. “He’s playing with Begg today.”

Now then, how should I tell them?

Fermet considered how he could guide a casual conversation to the fact that Niki had been in the Mask Makers’ hideout that day.

Quickly creating a plan, he was about to broach a new topic and steer the conversation in the direction he wanted—

—but Huey spoke first. “Scheming again, Fermet?”

“...Whatever do you mean?”

Fermet laughed, wearing a cordial smile, but Huey went on without emotion.

“Did you kill Niki this time, the way you killed Monica?”

“...I’m not sure I understand the joke, Huey. Monica? Who is that?”

Fermet’s expression stayed firmly in place, but—

“Oh, your smile is fake now,” Elmer commented with a breezy grin of his own.

Fermet’s face went blank, and he was quiet for a while.

No one spoke.

Fermet gazed at Huey’s and Elmer’s backs appraisingly—and then broke into a smile that was completely different from the earlier one.

“Ha-ha!”

A laugh escaped him.

“Ha-ha... Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Aah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

And then it spilled over.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

He held his sides, laughing, cackling, howling as if he’d gone mad.

It stopped as suddenly as it had started. With a sigh as he dropped the facade, he murmured, “You got me. When did you catch on?”

“Even if I hadn’t...a year is enough time to investigate.”

“I see! Of course you did. Given how quickly you ingratiated yourself to Lucrezia, I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“Oh yes, that’s right. I haven’t greeted you properly again after all this time, have I, Fermet?” Wearing his usual faint smile, Huey slowly turned around. “I’d completely forgotten there was a child about my age traveling with that band of witch hunters.”

The band of witch hunters was an abominable group that had taken the life of Huey’s mother, and yet his thin smile didn’t change.

“Well, well, what a shock. You’re the first person who’s ever looked that far into my past, Huey.”

Fermet sounded like a different person now, but Huey’s expression stayed just as it was.

“So what are you going to do?” Fermet asked. “Will you reveal my identity to Maiza and the other passengers? Or are you going to try to avenge Monica here and now? Either is fine with me, you know. Oh, but I will ask you not to tell Czes and Begg. I really couldn’t take it if Czes came to hate me over something so petty. I might eat him in

spite of myself.” Fermet was trying to provoke him, letting his right hand dangle in a careless way.

Elmer gazed at him and Huey with a smile, then murmured absently:

“Well, why don’t you two start by making up?”

When he heard that—for the first time, Fermet’s face went blank.

“...What? What are you talking about?”

“You killed Moni-Moni, right, Fermet? So say you’re sorry, and then come fish with us. Somebody caught a whopper here yesterday.”

Elmer was talking as if fishing was the main topic.

Fermet studied his face, but he couldn’t find a hint of any irony or sarcasm.

The suggestion had been genuine, spoken with utter sincerity.

A chill ran down Fermet’s spine, unlike anything he’d ever experienced before in his life.

That chill turned into anger.

“At the very least, I don’t think you and I will ever get along, Elmer C. Albatross,” he answered icily.

“Really? You were a Dormентаire spy, too, weren’t you, Fermet? That makes two of us. We should be friends.”

“I have to decline. *You killed my beloved Niki. I could never be friends with you,*” Fermet said utterly shamelessly.

Elmer was startled. “Huh? I killed Niki? What do you mean?”

Fermet’s expression returned, and he gave a mocking grin.

He was preparing to let that hypocrite Elmer know what he really was. He was planning to tell him volubly and vigorously, to regale to him like an epic storyteller, exactly how he’d destroyed Niki, and what end he’d driven her to.

What is this?

Why am I so upset?

The question kept welling up while he spoke—but he couldn't stop the surging waves of words.

For the first time in his life, he'd met a man who gave him chills. The only way to stop it was to control Elmer C. Albatross's emotions personally. He was obsessed at this point.

"...By now, Niki's either rotting under the rubble of that abandoned building, or the townspeople have killed her themselves. She's a corpse now. Maybe she believed in me until the bitter end, or maybe she realized my betrayal and died cursing my name... Or maybe Huey's. Maybe even yours."

Over the course of half an hour, Fermet had given a full account of his relationship with Niki.

Then he waited for Elmer's reaction. Would he fly into a rage and grab him, or would he grieve that his own suggestion to destroy the evidence had killed his friend? It didn't matter. At this point, the most important thing to Fermet was simply whether or not he could affect this man's emotions at all.

However—

"I see... So Niki might be dead. I hope she managed to die smiling, but..."

For just a moment, Elmer lowered his eyes sadly. Then:

"Well, *that aside*—make up with Huey, all right? And don't worry; we won't tell Czes and the others! So c'mon, smile more! That great big laugh a minute ago was so honest! I loved it!"

As if he'd forgotten Niki in just a few seconds, he gave a bright, genuine smile.

Incorporate his knowledge, his experience, his personality...into myself...?

No way in hell.

No way in hell!

Turning pale, Fermet tore his hand off Elmer's head. He backed away, as if he was seeing a ghost. "You are pure evil. Your existence is a blight on the world," he said, completely ignoring his own existence. With a hiss of fury, he withdrew and half staggered away.

Before the day was out, he'd taken Czes and Begg and left town as fast as he could, without even telling Maiza good-bye.



Unaware that Fermet would vanish from the town a few hours later, Elmer was utterly mystified as he watched his unsteady departure.

"What do you suppose is wrong with Fermet? Did the seasickness finally catch up with him?"

"You really are an idiot, although I'll acknowledge you are worthy of respect."

"You think so? You're making me blush."

As Elmer chuckled and rubbed his head self-consciously, Huey murmured to him, his face serious.

"To be honest, when I heard what he'd done to Niki, I started feeling angry. I thought I'd discarded emotions like that entirely; I suppose it isn't so easy."

"Niki could be alive, though. I'll watch for a chance to go back to Lotto Valentino and see."

"Of course you would."

As he listened to Elmer talk indifferently about life and death, Huey closed his eyes with some relief.

“...Do you remember what I asked you to do when we met that first time, a few days before we left port?”

“I remember. Uh, board the *Advena Avis* with you, and...”

“I’d like to ask you for that second favor again.” Watching his fishing line dangling into the water, Huey spoke quietly. “I believe I will change more and more after this. I’ll try anything I have to so I can keep my promise to Monica. But...if I see her again, and there’s nothing left of who I used to be...nothing left of who she loved...all of it will have been for nothing.”

“I doubt Monica would mind.” Elmer wasn’t joking; he’d seriously meant that.

Huey agreed, but then he shook his head slightly. “She might not mind, but I would. Ultimately, this is a selfish personal request.”

Then he turned to face Elmer and made his request, as a friend.

“So no matter how much I change...Elmer, *please stay just the way you are*. I know it’s a cruel, absurd thing to ask of you, but...if you remain the same, I think I can rely on you to find my way back to who I was back then. When she and I loved each other.”

Elmer gave him a simple answer. “You had better keep that promise you made me last year.”

“I will.”

“When you see Monica again...*both of you* come and show me the greatest smiles I’ve ever seen.”

Huey gave a wry smile. “The price is getting steeper.”

“But it’s fair, don’t you think? After all, about seventy years of life just turned into eternity. Trying to stay the same forever is going to be incredibly tough.”

“If anyone can do it, it’s you.”

Looking at Huey’s smile, Elmer nodded with satisfaction.

After that, the two of them continued to fish in silence for a while. Then, slowly, Huey got to his feet and spoke to Elmer without much emotion.

“All right. It’s time I was on my way.”

“See you later, then.”

Elmer’s response was just as casual.

This was good-bye.

Neither knew where the other was going, or how many months, years, or decades it would be before they next met. With someone like Szilard out there, they might never meet again.

Even so, as good-byes went, that was enough for them.

Huey knew that Elmer didn’t like teary good-byes, and he believed they’d meet again someday.

In the midst of eternity, there wasn’t much difference between one day and a hundred years.

Huey gave his only close friend a casual wave, then turned away and began his journey.

His eyes were on his goal, and he felt a solid connection to Elmer, behind him, and to Monica, who existed in the past.

That was the moment Huey Laforet’s long, long journey began.

Believing the threads that connected them would be wound close again someday in the distant future...he took a firm first step.



AFTERWORD

It's been a long time. This is Narita.

At the *Baccano!* jazz concert the other day, I got to listen to Mr. Yoshimori's wonderful music, and I was hyped up afterward for a very long time. Actually, I may still be... And so this has been *1711*, the conclusion of the *Baccano!* 1700s arc. This time around, I focused on the events that happened up till the boarding of the *Advena Avis*.

At the same time, *1711* is also a prologue that connects to *1935*, and to the concluding arc, *2003*. The hints embedded in this volume may be picked up again by the immortals several hundred years later, so I hope you'll stick with me for the remaining few volumes of the *Baccano!* series.

Next, I'm planning to write *DRRR!!*, Vol. 11 and the follow-up to *5656!* or *Vamp!*, Vol. 6, plus some *Hariyama, the Center of the World* short stories when I have free time. There's been a gap, but *Hariyama* hasn't ended, so please sit tight.

In addition, I got a call from Shueisha Inc., and it turns out they're going to let me write a *Bleach* novelization! It's a big deal and I'm nervous, but they're letting me write it fairly slowly so that I don't fall behind on my projects for Dengeki. When I do manage to safely deliver it to readers, I'll be thrilled if you enjoy it along with my Dengeki series!

I've gotten a variety of other jobs and fantastic story projects, and I'll do my best to make sure none of them fall through on my part, so please stick with me.

All these offers coming in are due entirely to the kindness of those around me and the support of my readers. In an attempt to repay even a little of that, I'll work hard to keep moving forward, although I'll keep it to a level where it doesn't wreck my health!

*The usual thank-yous begin here.

To my supervising editor, Wada (Papio), and the rest of the Dengeki Bunko editorial department. To the copy editors, for whom I always cause trouble by working too slowly, every single time. To the staff in all the departments at ASCII Media Works.

To the people who are constantly taking care of me: my family and friends, and other writers and illustrators.

To Director Omori, Ginyuu Shijin, and everyone else I'm indebted to in anime, manga, games, and other areas of the media mix.

To Katsumi Enami, who was tearing around designing characters for all sorts of games and still drew the terrific illustrations that grace this volume.

And to everyone who read this book.

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to all the people mentioned above. Thank you very much!

November 2011, Ryohgo Narita

Epilogue (Back): The Seductive Smile of the Affluent

2003 A Maritime History museum, somewhere on the American East Coast

The museum director had finished describing the violence between the House of Dormентаire and the Mask Makers that took place in 1711.

Once again, he turned to look at the young man, Jean-Pierre Accardo's descendant. His expression was serious.

"We did want to speak with you...but not just because Jean-Pierre's name was mentioned in the report."

"What do you mean?"

"Jean-Pierre Accardo seems to have been out of town during this time, due to certain circumstances. But afterward, he turned Lotto Valentino's 1711 disturbance into a play."

"...Ah."

The young man had anticipated this, but he was once again appalled at his ancestor's audacity.

"What kind of information network did he have? According to the sources here, he was in contact with several of the Dormентаire spies. Do you have any ideas...?"

"The one thing I can say is that... I'd rather not speak badly of my own ancestor, but as a human being, Jean-Pierre Accardo was a real scumb—"

Just as he was about to insult a member of his family, the door of the reception room opened.

"Director."

“What is it?! I’m with a guest!” The director frowned at the receptionist, who had burst into the room—and his frown only deepened when he heard the rest.

“It’s the FBI. They want us to give them the materials from the *Advena Avis*...”



“I retrieved the documents that were left on the *Advena Avis*, sir.”

The blond, bespectacled agent—a woman named Jessica Sullivan—stowed a box of papers in the back seat, then took her place in the driver’s seat.

Meanwhile, the man, also wearing glasses, who was sitting on the passenger side kicked back in his seat.

“Okay, nice work. Anything to report?”

“Actually, yes. The director was with a guest who had a connection to Lotto Valentino.”

The man in the passenger seat abruptly leaned forward. “What?”

As cold as ice, Jessica explained, “He was a descendant of Jean-Pierre Accardo, apparently.”

“Jean-Pierre...? Ohhh, yeah, yeah, the poet! Never did meet that guy. Dammit. I’d bet you dollars to donuts that guy knew something.”

“I did get his name and address. If you have questions, I’ll contact him.”

“...How the hell’d you manage that when he ain’t even local? Look, you can’t just pry your intel outta people these days, at least not without a warrant.”

Her worried boss seemed to be implying that such things hadn’t always been a problem.

Jessica kept wearing a frigid expression. “I can be terribly charming when I want to be, sir.”

“Christ, Jessica, have some shame. You can’t just...” The man sighed a bit uncomfortably and grumbled. “Now, your granddad, he was a proper cop. How the hell did we end up with you...? Well, never mind that. Anything else to report?”

“As for noteworthy discoveries... There is one thing I’d like to confirm with you.”

“What?”

Jessica looked serious, and the man turned to face her with similar gravitas.

Still unsmiling, Jessica adjusted her glasses smartly and asked, “From now on, when I submit reports to you, Deputy Director, may I begin them with ‘Hey, how’ve you been? Have you been lonely without me and my letters?’”

At that, her boss—Victor Talbot—stared back in shock for a moment. Then he flushed beet red and shouted, “What the—? The hell is wrong with you?! You read those?! Goddammit—! Wait, I left my reports on the maritime fortress! How the hell did copies end up on that ship?!”

“I hear they were discovered in the cabin of a passenger named Elmer.”

“The fucking smile junkie! He just took my stuff without asking!” Victor was trembling with anger.

“With all due respect,” Jessica offered, “he may have been trying to help you by bringing your belongings to the ship...”

“Well, seeing as he never gave them to me, he did a fucking bang-up job of that, didn’t he?! Aaaaaaah, forget all of this! That’s an order! Got it?!”

“Was this Lady Lucrezia more attractive than me?”

“She sure as hell was! She was a hundred times better than you!”



“What are they screaming about in there?” muttered the young man.

After promising to talk with the director again, he had come outside and heard angry yelling from a car.

That’s the FBI agent from earlier in the driver’s seat, isn’t it?

As he was walking along, lost in thought, he bumped into the woman in front of him.

“.....” The woman staggered.

“Oh— I’m sorry!”

Without thinking, he reached out and caught her hand in an attempt to keep her from falling.

That was when he noticed the thick bandages around her right hand.

When he took a closer look, it wasn’t just her arm. Her face was half covered with bandages as well. The woman herself seemed to be about twenty.

“.....”

She was gazing into the distance, and her mouth opened and shut soundlessly. The young man wasn’t sure how to react, but—

“Oh dear, dear, I’m so sorry. She was in an accident, and she’s never fully recovered from the shock.” Another woman came over to them and apologized.

“Oh, no, don’t worry about it.”

Whoa... These two make quite a pair.

The woman's daring clothes exposed far too much of her cleavage and legs for the museum's sober atmosphere. Flustered by her oddly captivating voice and beautiful face, the young man apologized and beat a hasty retreat.

After she'd watched him go, the flamboyant woman's eyes drifted to the FBI vehicle, where Victor was still shouting.

"Honestly! I'm so close, and you still haven't noticed, darling. You are as obtuse as always, Victor."

"....."

"Well, it has been close to three hundred years. He may have forgotten what I look like."

The woman who had left the FBI an anonymous tip about the immortal-related documents at the museum looked at the agent who had come to investigate, and she gave a mocking giggle. She turned to the bandaged girl beside her.

"Do you suppose Elmer and Fermet will remember you?"

".....!!"

Though she hadn't said any proper words—the bandaged girl smiled happily at those two names.

However, even the eye-catching woman, Lucrezia de Dormентаire, couldn't be sure which name she'd responded to.

When the girl heard those names, a scene rose in her memories, one that began with a certain sound.

Back in 1711, in that basement room, she'd heard a *click*.

It hadn't been the sound of the bombs activating.

A hidden door at the back of the passage had opened, and a buxom, bespectacled woman had appeared.

Just as the woman took her through that hidden door, the bombs had detonated.

Heat, suffocation, pain, and after that—darkness.

Remembering what was objectively a near-death experience, the girl with the shattered mind smiled.

In her memories, she was dying over and over, and *that was why* she'd tried to smile.

By now, even she didn't know who she was smiling for.

Obtain the liquor of immortality.

That had been the order Lucrezia had given her alchemists.

Szilard had completely ignored her, and Victor had sent her a letter instead: *You tricked me, you wench! How dare you make me worry! Mark my words, you'll be sobbing with regret someday!* A few years later, a sample had arrived from Fermet, but by that time, Lucrezia had *already* become immortal.

Huey and Elmer, as if they'd planned it together, had sent the liquor of immortality to her using the same method. They hadn't analyzed it and made it themselves; they'd only drunk half of their portion and saved the rest in another vessel. They'd sent those vessels to Lucrezia, just as they were.

She knew that a mere mouthful would be enough, so she'd drunk what she'd received from Huey herself and given what she'd received from Elmer to other people.

And that included the woman with her now. Hugging the woman to her side, Lucrezia seemed to be exchanging a passionate vow with the whole world as she said in her sultry tone, "It looks as if dear Fermet has several plans in motion himself. How utterly fascinating this will be."

She began walking, leading the bandaged girl by the hand. She would be watching the impending commotion involving the immortals play out as an absolute bystander.

“You give it your best, too, all right, Victor darling? If you do well, I’ll praise you for it.”

With a mocking giggle, the avaricious woman walked right past the FBI car.

Victor, who was still giving his subordinate hell, never did notice his beloved. Completely oblivious, he was on the brink of getting pulled into the crazy ruckus.

As if that itself was the fate that had been meted out to him.

To be continued in Baccano! 2003

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